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LECTURES ON ECCLESIASTES.

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LECTURES ON ECCLESIASTES

DELIVERED IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY

BY THE VERY REV.

GEORGE GRANVILLE BRADLEY, D.D.

DEAN OF WESTMINSTER

O.T. Ecclesiastes Crit, int, etc
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PREFACE.

The following Lectures were delivered in Westminster Abbey on Saturday afternoons during three months of the winter of 1884-5. They form one of several courses of weekly addresses on portions of, or subjects connected with, Holy Scripture, which have been given in the same Church by Canons of Westminster, or by the Dean, during the last four years. The experiment of inviting the public to meet in the Abbey on week-days for such a purpose was first tried by the late Dean Stanley, who in the very month in which he died was devoting a portion of every Saturday afternoon to a Lecture on the Beatitudes. Of the aim and purpose of those who have followed his example enough has been said in the opening words of the first of the following Lectures. The publication however of the present course may require a word of explanation, or even of apology.

Its author can make no claim to have enlarged by independent researches of his own the field of knowledge accessible to the theologian or the student. He is no Hebraist, and his acquaintance with Talmudic and Rab-

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binical literature is necessarily derived from such English, French, or German sources as are open to any educated reader. Nor have his own studies been such as to have enabled him to throw any fresh light on the patristic exegesis of the book of Ecclesiastes. He has read much and thought much on every line of that book; but he cannot venture to look on the present volume as a contribution to exegetical or theological literature properly so called. It has no such pretensions.

But the obvious interest taken in these lectures during their delivery encouraged him to believe that the large number of singularly patient and attentive listeners whom week after week he saw before him in the Abbey might represent others, who would attach some value to a popular and continuous exposition of the contents of a book which has by turns attracted, perplexed, and repelled readers through many centuries, and the study of which has been prosecuted with renewed activity both in England and on the Continent during the last few years. Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since Dr. Ginsburg's valuable edition placed in the hands of the ordinary English reader, not only an excellent commentary on the book itself, but also an exceedingly interesting sketch of earlier and more recent Jewish and Christian commentators, as well as of the ancient versions. Since that time such works as, among others, those of Dr. Samuel Cox[1], Dr. Wright[2], and, above all, the scholarly and instructive volume of Dean Plumptre[3], have

[1] 'The Quest of the Chief Good.'
[2] 'The Book of Koheleth,' 1883.
[3] 'Ecclesiastes or the Preacher,' 1881.

testified to the general interest felt in the history and contents of this portion of the Old Testament by the English public. On the other hand, the recent volume of M. Renan, and the elaborate work of Graetz, are sufficient evidence that the question of the authorship and design of a book which deals with problems of such wide and enduring interest has not lost its hold on readers in France and Germany.

In preparing himself for the writing and delivery of his own lectures the writer has freely availed himself of the labours of these and many other authorities, both English and foreign; among the latter he is especially indebted to Ewald, Hitzig and Reuss. He has rarely attempted to acknowledge his special obligations to any single writer or commentator, nor indeed would he find it easy to do so. Nor had he any wish to load his pages with footnotes and references. He must be content with thankfully acknowledging the aid which he has received from many sources, and in expressing the hope that he has done something towards facilitating for the general reader, and for those who have little leisure or taste for more methodical study, the acquisition of some acquaintance with the contents and general teaching of one of the most interesting and instructive, yet most obscure of the writers of the Old Testament. His own views of the contents and history of the book he has embodied in the pages that follow. Those who care to read them will remember that they were delivered at intervals of a week to a mixed congregation, necessarily of a somewhat uncertain and varying character, and will excuse a certain amount of repetition, which under such circumstances was unavoidable.

It should be added that the Revised Translation of the Old Testament was not published till the present volume was in the Press; references however to its rendering of some of the most obscure or most disputed passages have been inserted wherever it appeared desirable.

LECTURES ON ECCLESIASTES.

LECTURE I.

Introductory.

Let me begin by reminding those to whom I speak of the origin and aim of this course of lectures.

It occurred to some of those whose privilege it is to minister in this venerable and sacred House of God, that there were many who would gladly meet here, on these winter afternoons, for another purpose than that of either joining in actual worship, or of receiving that spiritual instruction to give which is the highest of all objects to which a Christian preacher can devote himself.

It was thought that there were not a few who, in an age of keen enquiry and active thought, would hail some attempt to bring before them some of the results of a careful and exact study of various portions of that manifold and complex collection of sacred literature, which we call by the common name of the Bible, and in which we Christians find the record of that gradual manifestation by God of Himself to man, which this morning's second lesson spoke of as at last perfected in His Son[1]. The experiment was fairly tried

[1] Hebrews i. 1. Lesson for November 8.

by one and another among us, and the result more than confirmed our expectations. It was found that there were many, men and women, young and old, not a few of them men immersed in the busy and anxious life of this great metropolis, who felt a keen interest in receiving some assistance towards understanding more clearly than before, either the relations towards each other of some of the component parts of the Old and New Testament, or again, the actual contents, and meaning, and the place, not only in the Bible, but in the divine education of the human race, of one or another of the books—especially of the less generally studied books—which it comprises.

It was the latter of these tasks which I attempted two years ago, when, for some weeks together, I spoke on the general contents and teaching of the Book of Job. I tried then to bring home to those who, week after week, encouraged me by their sympathy and attention, the true scope and subject of that marvellous book, which some outside the circle of the Church of Christ have described as the greatest of all works of human genius, some within that circle have looked on as a fruitless and discursive discussion of inscrutable problems.

It was my object to lead my hearers to see that, if they would read its chapters carefully and consecutively, read them even in the striking language of our own stately, though at times obscure and inadequate, translation, they would find in them something more than a touching record of Oriental resignation, or even than an example to all time of loving submission to the will of a God who gives and who takes away. I tried to make them feel with me that they had set before them in that book something more than this; I wished them to recognise that the 'patience of Job' of which St. James speaks included other elements than those of mere submission and acquiescence. I aimed at putting before them the true and actual picture which the book presents—a picture of a human

soul face to face with the very darkest problems that can even now try the intellect, or tax the faith, or perplex the conscience of mankind; of a soul tossing to and fro in a moral and spiritual agony, which overmastered the sense of all bodily torture, of all material and domestic losses; a soul despairing, doubting, questioning, appealing, yet holding fast in the darkness to its God, and finding at last, not indeed a full solution to all life's riddles, yet peace and reconciliation with the God whose power it had acknowledged, but whose goodness and whose justice it had not shrunk for a time from boldly questioning.

I had reason to believe that some of those who took part in those weekly meetings shared with him who spoke to them in the absorbing interest of a portion of sacred literature which, it is scarcely too much to say, has lain till almost within the present generation—I hardly dare say how long or how generally—almost practically unexplored by the ordinary reader.

It was suggested to me, at the close of those meetings, to undertake on the next occasion a more difficult, a less obviously instructive, in some ways, I fear, a less attractive, task—that of attempting to interest a congregation like the present in the contents and history of the Book of Ecclesiastes.

I shall not hesitate to state at once the reasons which made me for some time shrink from, and even postpone, the attempt.

In the first place, the study of the Book is beset with special difficulties, other and in some respects far greater difficulties than those which cross the path, and tax the judgment, of the reader of the Book of Job. Whatever may be the occasional obscurities of portions of that book, its chief current of thought runs, in the main, clear and transparent. In Ecclesiastes the case is quite different. The book is in many respects—not in one but in many—an enigma. It is not

only that some of the most important verses—sometimes just those on which we would lay our hands as containing at last the surest indications of its true aim, and of its highest and most momentous teaching—are written in a language which is, to us, so obscure that we dare not rely absolutely on the meaning which we would fain attach to them. We feel like those who, toiling up some Alpine height, either see the pathway suddenly disappear, or must rest their feet on a support that they feel may give way suddenly beneath them. This is a difficulty which it shares in some, though in a far less, degree, with some of the most striking portions of the Book of Job. But quite apart from these, and from other difficulties, in which I yet hope to interest you, two problems meet us at its very threshold, which, in treating the Book of Job, we can in one case easily answer, in the other cheerfully put aside. In the first place, it is not merely the obscurity of this or that verse which we find baffle us in reading Ecclesiastes; but when we ask the question which seems the first and most important of all questions, viz. what is the main design and purpose of the book, we are at once bewildered by the multiplicity of answers. To some it has presented itself as merely the sad outpouring of the deep melancholy of a world-weary monarch, sated with all that life can offer. Others have found in it 'a penitential dirge;' the sad confession and recantation of a repentant Solomon, reconciled at last to the God whom he had forgotten. There are not a few who will tell you something quite different. They will confidently assure you that its main object was to prepare the way for Christ, by expressly teaching the doctrine of a future life, and of a judgment beyond the grave. A Christian Father, St. Jerome, was followed by an army of commentators, who read in it a discourse on the blessedness of an ascetic, and even of a monastic, life. Others, on the other hand, will give you a very different answer; they will tell you not merely that it contains a protest against an enervating asceticism, but that it breathes throughout the spirit

of the merest scepticism, or of utter indifferentism, or of simple epicureanism; or that its real undertone is that of a cynical materialism, or of a gloomy fatalism, or of a still darker pessimism; they will absolutely deny its having any claim to rank as a religious book at all, still less to take its place in the most sacred of all books. Again, while some tell us that it is a genuine record of the age of Solomon, others see in it a philosophical treatise of centuries later, saturated with Greek thought. To some it is a political pamphlet; a satire, almost a lampoon, on some Eastern government; to others a handbook for courtiers; with some it ranks as a systematic treatise; with others as a drama, or dialogue, in which two or more voices answer and refute each other; to others it seems a collection, put together almost at random, of various sayings; to others a strange soliloquy, full of cross currents and conflicting eddies, now steeped in sadness, now commending enjoyment, now pointing to the reign of law, now asserting the supremacy of mere chance, preaching now a kosmos, now a chaos.

Need I go on? I have said enough to show you that any discussion of the contents of the book is beset at its very commencement with serious difficulties. I could not ask an intelligent listener to come here, and yet pass by in silence questions on the view that we are to take of which our whole conception of the character of the book must turn.

And there is at least one further question, already indicated, to which it will be impossible for us to close our eyes.

The authorship, or rather the age, of the Book of Job is a question of exceeding interest. But it is one on which, in the entire absence of any direct evidence, all reasonable Christians will be prepared to argue dispassionately, and to feel themselves at entire liberty to accept any view that may commend itself to their thoughtful judgment. They will listen with impartial calmness to those who place its composition in the early days of Moses, or even earlier still, and to those who

would bring it down to the days of the captivity of Judah, and the apparent shipwreck of the national hopes. But with this book the case is entirely different. We have, on the one hand, the apparently clear and precise statement of the book itself, ascribing the authorship to King Solomon. We have also the fact that this statement was accepted by the concordant voices of Jewish Rabbis and Christian Fathers, I had almost said by the unanimous verdict of the Jewish and of the Christian Church, and was absolutely unquestioned till, at all events, the period of the Reformation. On the other hand, the modern student is called on to consider the value and weight of arguments enforced by the learning and authority of the vast majority of the great Hebraists of the last two generations. These tend to show that these chapters are of far later date, were placed, like the Book of Wisdom—also generally attributed to Solomon—for very natural reasons in the mouth of the master of Hebrew wisdom; but that their style, their substance, their social, political, and religious allusions, their very texture and fabric, are absolutely irreconcileable with either the person or the age of King Solomon; and that they form one of the latest portions, if not the very latest, of the Hebrew canon.

You will see at once a further reason against an attempt to interest so mixed, so unknown, an audience in so entangled and thorny a question. It was like asking you to tread a fiery soil, whose slumbering ashes might burst out in bitter controversy. And it was also one on which any who spoke at all would rightly wish to speak with a well-matured conviction; neither to embrace heedlessly what was new, nor to cling blindly to what was old.

But it was not only the difficulties of the book that made me hesitate. I feared also that I should find its discussion far less instructive than that of that other book. I say less instructive for this reason. The teaching, the practical teaching, of the Book of Job, is one which the Christian teacher

may gladly welcome for himself, and commend most earnestly to his hearers. The picture which we have there of God's love and tenderness for the afflicted soul—of His forbearance towards doubt, despair, reproaches, questioning—of the fatherly love and goodness that lie behind the most searching affliction, the thickest clouds and deepest darkness of life—is a lesson which will never grow old, till all tears are wiped from all eyes, till 'the morning breaks and the shadows flee away.' *Ye have heard*, says St. James[1], *of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord, that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy.* It is a lesson that is not displaced, but illuminated, by all the teaching of Jesus. But the single-minded reader of the Book of Ecclesiastes, he who will allow that book to speak for itself, and does not read other meanings into almost every verse, must feel at every step that he is breathing a different atmosphere from that of the teaching of the Gospels. He may quote a striking warning here, find a wholesome lesson there. He may lay his hand on words, now of far-seeing prudential wisdom, now of keen insight into human nature. He may refuse to surrender this strange Preacher, royal or discrowned, to rival and unchristian schools, to the sensualist, to the fatalist, to the materialistic pessimist, to the easy-going worldling, who claim him for their own. He will find, in even the lowest and most depressed and depressing tones of 'the still sad music' which he makes, voices that are not their voices, notes which they never reach. But he will feel, for all this, that a great gulf separates his teaching from that of Him who breathed a quickening spirit into all human life, who offered to every child of Adam, not the lesson, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,' but fresh interests, new motives for activity, new spheres of work, new hopes, new aims. The teaching which it offers will be, must be, if not wholly, yet very largely, a teaching by contrast.

[1] v. 11.

And, lastly, I feared that the study of the book might prove less interesting and less attractive to those who were invited to join in it. I felt this, not only on the grounds already stated, the difficult and complex questions that beset its discussion, the riddle that the book itself presents, the riddles that encompass it. These very questions and perplexities have, I know, an interest of their own. But I felt it on other grounds. The book has no doubt exercised a strange spell over certain minds. The modern satirist has found in its sad refrain, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,' words to point the nakedness and hollowness of much that seems most imposing and most brilliant in the world around us. Its feebler echo finds a strange place here on the walls of a Christian church, in a memorial to the dead[1]. Another denizen of Poets' Corner embodied his interpretation of its substance in an elaborate and forgotten poem[2]. But in the main, am I not right in saying that those who come here, those to whom life comes home with all its press of duties, its warmth of affection and its difficulties, cares, problems, sorrows, and interests, do not care to come here for lessons of mere disillusion? These they can find elsewhere. They ask for something more sustaining, more satisfying, more upholding; something that will sweeten what is bitter in life, not expose its bitterness; that will give substance to what seems hollow, not ring changes on its hollowness. It is not the 'weary' only and the 'heavy-laden' who 'come for rest to their souls' to a place like this. We all shrink from a view of life, from dwelling here at least on a view of life, that seems to rob that life of all its interest, its dignity, its nobleness, to paralyse its activity, to stifle its enthusiasm, to remove from it all hope of progress to a higher and purer ideal.

[1] 'Life is a jest, and all things shew it;
I thought so once, and now I know it.'
Inscription on Gay's monument in Poets' Corner.

[2] 'Solomon, or the Vanity of the World,' by Matthew Prior.

And lastly, for many of the elements that give such interest and such colour to even the long and, in some sense, monotonous chapters of the Book of Job, we shall look here in vain. The touching story, the fire, the agony, the revulsion from calmness to passion, the bitter pleading, the cries, the tumult, will be all wanting. For the glimpses into the secrets of a real but far-off life, those traces of an early world and half-settled, or almost primeval stage, for the splendour of the pictures of nature, animate and inanimate, which form the background of that long strange drama, we shall look in vain. All here is calm and measured; the face of the speaker is pale and still; he has no narrative to set before us; the stream of feeling runs at times very deep and full, but silently and noiselessly. A dreary sense of the miseries and worthlessness of human life broods around us as we read; haunts us perhaps as with his accents in our ears we sweep past the leagues of habitations that spread around this vast metropolis. There is poetry, but it is the poetry, if not of despair, of despondency, of decay, and gloom. There is cheerfulness, but it is not that of joyous hopefulness or gladsome faith, but of a forced and grim acquiescence in the irresistible doom of humanity.

Yet for all this, in spite of the undeniable difficulties of the book—in spite of its inadequate and far from Christian teaching—in spite also of the apparently uninviting nature of its contents—I feel convinced of the inherent and undying interest of the questions which it will suggest to us. I am inclined to hope that those who will join me, so far as possible, in its study, will agree with me that it is well worth our study. We shall find, I think, that even in its saddest, most despairing accents, even in what we might call its most repellent aspect, there is something eminently, pre-eminently, human; that it touches chords which at one time or another have found an answering fibre within us all. For it points at every turn to questions that, even now, come home, and very

nearly home, to the human heart; to a wider range, it may be, than are stirred even by the majestic eloquence of that other book. If you turn with any lack of interest from its study, I believe that the fault will lie not so much in the obscurity or dulness of its chapters, as in the incapacity of your guide.

May I now add a few words on the position which, apart from their special contents, this book and that to which I have already referred hold in our English Bibles?

The ordinary reader of the Old Testament will find it easy to make, to a certain extent, a classification of the different books which form its contents. He will notice at once that the first five books—commonly called the Pentateuch, or the Books of Moses, or the Law—are followed by a long series of historical and narrative books, in which the story of the Jewish race is brought down from the death of Moses to the period that followed the return from the Babylonian captivity. They include a kind of appendix, so to speak, in the Book of Esther. Now, if he passes on at once to the concluding portion of the Old Testament, he will find that it consists entirely of the writings of seventeen Prophets, or inspired teachers and preachers, of the Jewish nation; and that these are arranged, partly in chronological order, but partly also, as is the case with St. Paul's Epistles, in that of their relative length and importance. They begin with Isaiah, they end with the latest in time of all the Prophets, with Malachi. So far the classification, though quite different from that current among ancient and modern Jews, is obvious and simple. The Pentateuch, and the Histories, on the one side of the volume; the Prophets on the other.

But between these two portions, come five books, which do not so readily lend themselves to any one classification or title.

First in our own version, first also in that Greek translation which, we must remember, took the place of the Hebrew

Bible with the enormous majority of the early converts to Christianity; first also in the Vulgate, or Latin Translation, which was for centuries the one form in which the Bible was accessible to the mass of Western Christendom,—first also in the great translation of Luther, which formed such an epoch in the religion, language, and history of Germany—comes the Book of Job. It was placed there no doubt in deference to a received, if questionable, tradition of its extreme antiquity, which gave it precedence in the Syriac Version over all but the Books of Moses. Of the contents of this great and sacred poem—for poem you will remember, with the exception of its two opening and its one closing chapters, it is throughout—I need say nothing more. I will only remind you that it deals with the same terrible problem, the apparent want of righteousness in the government of the world, that prompts the saddest passages in the book which we are about to study. Nor need I describe to you the book which follows; that collection of Psalms, in which we can study the manifold outpouring of the human spirit in its communings with the Spirit of God, from the days of the Poet King to a far later age.

Immediately after these two totally different embodiments of the very highest flight of inspired human poetry—the one the Book of Job, so far like the Book of Ecclesiastes, that it is almost a Gentile poem, with scarcely a single allusion to the history, or the scenery, or the associations of the Holy Land, the other saturated with the distinctive national life of the singers of Israel—come three books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. They are profoundly different in many points from each other, but they are alike in this, that they each claim, directly or indirectly, the authorship of Solomon, who is stated by some Jewish authorities to have written the last in his youth; the Proverbs in his wise maturity; the book on which I am now to speak to you in his dreary and disillusionised old age.

Of the other two of these books I need say little. You will all be aware that, taken in its first and literal sense, the Song of Solomon is not a religious poem at all. It lends itself readily enough to pious and mystical and allegorical applications; and in this manner has been largely used for ages alike by Jewish and Christian writers. But the student who looks merely to the most obvious meaning of verse after verse, will find borne in upon him, perhaps first of all, the recognition—shall I say the thankful recognition?—of the fact, that even in the Sacred Canon there is room, side by side with the most spiritual yearnings of the Psalmist, for the fervent description of natural affection, room also for the simple genuine sentiment of delight in nature, for the singing of birds and the voice of the turtle, for the green fruit on the fig-tree, and the scent of the early vine tendrils[1]. Nor need I say more than one word on the Book of Proverbs. It deserves, and should receive, a separate treatment of its own. I will only remind you that both in the longer addresses which form its opening ten chapters, and in the short antithetical, well balanced, aphorisms or proverbs, couched almost always in double lines or couplets, which follow; and again in its personification and glorification of Wisdom as opposed to Folly—as also in its total absence of any local colour or national allusions—it has not a little in common with the wholly different book on which I purpose to speak to you.

To that book, and to some of the questions connected with its design, meaning, and history, I will ask your undivided attention next time. I have little doubt, as I have said already, in spite of the doubts and difficulties that lie couched at the very portal, and the patches of obscurity and darkness through which we must feel our way, that when we have once passed within its precincts, we shall find much to interest and impress, and something to aid us. Those dreary sentiments, those disjointed proverbs, those hollow wraiths

[1] Stanley's Jewish History, vol. ii. p. 241.

of unavailing consolation, those wearisome repetitions, those unintelligible utterances, those terrible pictures of human destinies, those snatches of startling and, as it might seem, wholly irreligious teaching, those 'hard sayings,' will gather a fresh interest as we try to track them through their many windings to their true sense and actual teaching. We shall see in them, if we do so faithfully, no body of Christian doctrine wrapped up in an unchristian form, but that which is at all times one of the most moving of all spectacles—the human spirit led to face in hours of gloom its relations towards the world and towards its God—struggling with the same problems that vex our souls, and feeling its way through a night of darkness to some measure at least of light and knowledge. We shall feel that we are listening to one of those of whom our Saviour said that 'they desired to see the things which we see, and did not see them.'

[November 8, 1884.]

LECTURE II.

The Authorship and Age of Ecclesiastes.

I spoke last week of some of the difficult—the exceedingly difficult, if exceedingly interesting—questions which would be forced on our attention before we could enter on any careful and continuous study of the Book of Ecclesiastes. These difficulties will meet us at every step, and you will forgive me if I ask you to look them with me in the face; not to mask them, as it were, and so pass on. The very title of the book is obscure. The Greek word, 'Ecclesiastes,' borrowed from the oldest translation of the Old Testament, is rendered in our version, under the guidance of Luther, by the English word, 'the Preacher,' and in those parts of the body of the book where it recurs presents itself always in this form. How far the Greek word itself admits of this translation is questionable, and—what is more important still—the meaning of the Hebrew word which that Greek word represents is much disputed. 'Preacher,' 'Ecclesiastes,' 'Koheleth'—a mist hangs round all these forms of its title. The authorship too of the book, and its date, are questions on which, as we shall see, competent critics come to the most conflicting conclusions. Again, its very form is contested. Is it prose or poetry? 'Genuine poetry,' says one of the very greatest of Hebrew scholars[1]; 'pure prose, rising at times into poetry,' say, more plausibly at least, others of scarcely less authority. And again, is it, whether prose or poetry, a dramatic discussion, like the 'Two Voices' of our own poet? Or is it a medley of conflicting, loosely ordered,

[1] Ewald, Kohelet, 1837.

thoughts which Providence, or accident, has preserved? Or is it a collection—deliberately made—of scattered sayings of wisdom? Or a somewhat incoherent, if inspired, meditation on human life? Or is it a systematic and philosophical treatise on the Supreme Good? or a Christian sermon under a thin disguise?

On all these points there is, as I reminded you last week, the greatest possible divergence of opinion and of judgment. And when we come to the question of questions, the true substance, and real aim and teaching, of the book, the discord, as I also reminded you, is even more baffling. Some views, current in quite modern literature, I have already indicated. The author, we have been lately told on high authority[1], is a sceptic, a sceptic pure and simple, who questions everything, and while nominally letting drop a few respectful and traditional phrases as to the existence and power of God, utterly disbelieves in His control of, or His care for, human affairs; has no belief at all in a future life; and questions these things, not with the passionate pleading of the Psalmist or of Job, but quite calmly: not grovelling in the dust, not crying for the light; but just looking (it is said) at the riddles of life, 'shrugging his shoulders,' and saying there is no solution. *Vanitas vanitatum.* 'All is vanity.' What then is, in this view, his practical teaching? It is that, we are told, of a cultivated Epicurean, who discourages all zeal on one side, all excess on the other. *Be not righteous over much*, he says, in so many words, *neither be over much wicked*[2]. He is, in the eyes of a countryman of Talleyrand, a very Talleyrand transferred from the sphere of Diplomacy to that of Religion, and warning us against zeal above all things. Do not waste time on ideals. *Better*, he says in so many words, *the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire*[3]. It is vain to set yourself to do battle with the wrongs of life. *That which is crooked*, he warns us, *cannot be*

[1] Renan, l'Ecclésiaste, 1882. [2] vii. 16, 17. [3] vi. 9.

made straight[1]. Besides, *who knoweth*, he asks, *what is good for man in his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow*[2]? The evils of life are incurable—make the best of them. Government is rotten to the core; you will see, he says, justice and judgment perverted; but what then?—*on the side of the oppressors*, he urges, *is power*[3]. Society is corrupt throughout, *Folly is set in great dignity*[4]; *Bread is not to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding*[5]. But then kings, who are the crown and summit of this organized rottenness and corruption, are, he sees, very powerful beings. *Who may*, he asks in so many words, *who may say unto them, what doest thou*[6]? *Curse not the king, therefore, even in thy thought; nor the rich even in thy chamber*[7]. You cannot foresee or affect the future; *man knoweth not that which shall be*[8]. Old age, if you live to it, is mere life in death; the grave will end all. *The dead*, he says, *know not anything*. Fame, too, is a mere illusion: *The memory of them is forgotten*[9]. What then? Take freely that one gift of which you can be sure, the enjoyment of the moment; not the foolish excess which will defeat its own end, not the devotion of your life to the constant pursuit of pleasure, which experience has taught me, the Wise Man, will end in disappointment, but the moderate enjoyment of that which is within your reach.

And this, we are confidently told, is the whole teaching of the book.

But to others the preacher goes even beyond this. He may be in one sense a Fatalist, a Sceptic, an Epicurean; but these things lie on the surface. He is at heart something more than either. He is, so far as was possible in the age in which he lived, what in modern phrase we should call a professed and unflinching pessimist. By this we mean what? Just this, that he holds—let us state it clearly—that human existence is in itself, as compared with non-existence, a pure

[1] vii. 13. [2] vi. 12. [3] iv. 1. [4] x. 6. [5] ix. 11.
[6] viii. 4. [7] x. 20. [8] viii. 7. [9] ix. 5.

evil. He is in entire sympathy with those who even now assert that the highest type with which we are acquainted of that mysterious entity which we call life, viz. the human organism as seen in civilized and cultivated man, is necessarily burdened with a weight of pain in full proportion to its complexity and development. The higher, therefore, that type rises in the scale of being, the sadder is its lot; the greater and more pressing the consciousness of a growing want of correspondence between itself and the conditions under which it has to work out its existence, between, in the phrase of to-day, 'the organism and its environment.' He echoes, we are told, or anticipates almost precisely, the very words of the Greek poet, that *not to be born at all is best of all*, but failing this, that *death is better than life*[1]. And this is no passing cry, like those wrung from Job by piercing agony: such as, 'Man is born to sorrow as the sparks fly upward.' No! it is the slowly formed and deliberate judgment of one who is represented as having coldly sounded the depths of philosophical enquiry, and watched with careful eyes the whole round of human experience. *Therefore I hated life*[2], he says as the result, and again, *I praised the dead that are already dead more than the living which are yet alive*[3]. And again, *the day of death is better than the day of one's birth*[4]. It is an evil world, he tells us; *madness is in men's hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead*[5]; or again, *there is one event, one end, to all, to the righteous and to the wicked*[6]. It may be well to find, for those who can accept them, some temporary alleviations for the malady of life in such moderate enjoyment as the hour may bring. But the only true cure is death, and the one lesson impressed on him by the spectacle of nature and by the calm study of life is the hollowness of all things—the bankruptcy of human

[1] iv. 2, 3; Soph. Œd. Col. 1225. [2] ii. 17. [3] iv. 2.
[4] vii. 1. [5] ix. 3. [6] ix. 2.

hopes, and the worthlessness of all man's aspirations. *Vanitas vanitatum*—all indeed is vanity.

Such are the views which have been, which are, taken by no mean students of the book. I need hardly say that if they are correct, if we have nothing to say against them or beyond them; if they are the last word, the final verdict of a fair and scientific criticism, then we may be well amazed at finding in our Bibles a book which not only makes faith and religion things absolutely impossible, but robs human life of every aim, and takes away from it every ground on which we can build any stable morality. In its own sad words, 'All indeed is vanity.' For the Bible, we must remember is emphatically a religious book. It is this, if it is anything at all. It is not placed in our hands to teach us philosophy, or science, or even history in itself. It deals with one subject, the relation of man to God and of God to man. What place is there in such a book for a writer who treats all such relations as an empty dream?

I have indicated some of the questions, the somewhat startling questions, it may seem, into which the study of this book must lead us. Let me speak now of the vexed question of its authorship, and of the age in which it saw the light. You will understand me if I decline to pass on and leave the subject untouched.

Who is this 'Preacher,' if Preacher we may call him, whose words have found such strange and manifold interpretations?

The answer will at first sight seem obvious. Though Solomon is not mentioned by name, as he is in the opening words of the Book of Proverbs and of the Song of Songs, though indeed the direct mention of his name seems carefully avoided, yet he is clearly indicated by the words of the first verse of chapter i, in which the writer speaks of himself as the son of David, and by verse 2, in which he adds, *that he was king over Israel in Jerusalem;* as also by the language of verse 16, and again of chapter ii, in which he speaks of his

wisdom and his wealth as having surpassed those of all his predecessors, strange as the expression doubtless is, *of all that were before me in Jerusalem*[1]. Whatever the cause of the suppression of the name, the person indicated is clearly that of Solomon.

And in addition to this, the statement, direct or indirect, of the book itself, we have the unanimous acceptance of the authorship of Solomon by all Hebrew and all Christian writers down to a comparatively recent period. There is, no doubt, evidence that, so late as the close of the first century after the Christian era, there was some hesitation in the minds of the leaders of the Jewish Church, if not as to the admission of the book to what we call the sacred canon, yet certainly as to ranking it at all on a level with its most honoured portions. St. Jerome, again, tells us that the Jews of his day were keenly offended at the tone of its teaching. More than one of the great Jewish writers has put on record the offence caused him by isolated verses. It is quite true also that no portion of the book is alluded to or quoted, either in the New Testament or by the earliest writers of the Christian Church. But of any doubts as to its being a genuine work of Solomon we hear nothing. And it is urged that to call in question its authorship, and to refer its composition to a later date, is simply to brand it as the work of a forger; it is to substitute for Solomon an untruthful personator, pretending at the very threshold that his work is something which it is not; snatching, in fact, at a great name, in order to give his utterances an influence which they would not of themselves obtain. Nay, some writers go much further than this. We have no right, they tell us, to enter on such a question. The critical study of the Bible is more than permissible, they say, is useful, so long as it confines itself to clearing away difficulties and elucidating the sacred text. But the moment that it takes upon itself to question by its own

[1] ii. 7, 9.

light any statement whatever made in Holy Scripture, it becomes at once a purely destructive agency, antagonistic and fatal to all faith. You can no more trust such critics, we are told, than you could trust a dishonest workman, who, when employed to clean and scour a sea-going ship, bored holes through her ribs and did his best to scuttle her. That Solomon wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes is, it is urged, a fact plainly and incontestably revealed on the authority of God's Word. If the statement suggests difficulties or doubts, they are either to be regarded as trials of our faith, or as the suggestions of fanciful and malignant critics. To treat them seriously is to involve ourselves in questions of incalculable issue; and to look on the authorship of this book as an open question tends directly to sap the very foundations, not of the Hebrew Scriptures only, but of the Christian religion[1].

I have put the view which I have stated in the strongest light possible, using the very language of its foremost upholders. I may say at once that I entirely dissent from it; nay, that I think its whole tone one against which Christians who value truth themselves, and feel sympathy with everyone to whom truth is dear, are bound emphatically to protest. The same arguments, fairly carried out in another direction, would have kept Galileo in his prison, consigned, it may be, Newton to the stake. The truths on which we Christians rest in life and death are not bound up with these questions of the authorship, or the age, of the work which we are about to study. We find men to whom these truths are inconceivably dear, men who are the very foremost champions of the essential truths of the Gospel against those who dispute them, fully agreeing with their adversaries, and with each other, that it is impossible that this book, whose canonicity they fully admit, was written by Solomon, or for centuries later. We find one after another of the greatest Hebrew scholars of the last two generations—of the age, remember,

[1] The Authorship of Ecclesiastes. Macmillan & Co., 1880.

at which such questions have received their first full discussion—coming to the same conclusion. Can we refuse to give their arguments respectful consideration?

In the first place, such men repudiate at once the word 'forgery' as applied to the question of authorship. The book, they say, is not a forgery, any more than certain books of ancient authors, such as Plato or Cicero, or of modern poets, deserve the name. It is a dramatic personation by one who, born in a dark and gloomy hour of his nation's existence, and moved and stirred by a voice within to put before his countrymen certain views of the world and of life, chose the title of the king, around whose memory clustered innumerable associations as the great sage and philosopher of the Hebrew race; one whose name had become the very type of human wisdom combined with human sadness and frailty. The very form, it is added, in which his memory, so sad on one side, so glorious on the other, is evoked from the darkness of the past, points to a dramatic rather than historical use. His name is avoided, and he speaks in the words, not 'I *am* King,' as the actual Solomon of the Book of Kings must necessarily have done if writing in his life-time, but rather as a spirit called up from the world of shades, and speaking centuries after his decease. I *was* king, he says, over Israel; the phrase itself, in spite of all attempts to explain it, points rather to the traditions which spoke of Solomon as stripped by the Evil One of his royal dignity, robbed of his mystical ring, and wandering from place to place a discrowned and needy vagrant, with the sad cry, *I was king in Jerusalem*, than to the recorded facts of sacred history. It is added that the scaffolding of the age of Solomon is only erected at the entrance of the work. It disappears wholly before the end of the second chapter, and we pass erelong into another atmosphere—an age of satraps and spies, and bad government, and formal religion, and incipient Pharisaism, and incipient asceticism; an age of

general misery, oppression, and corruption. Indeed, the whole argument as to the authorship of Solomon lies not in a phrase here, or a word there, but in the whole texture of the book.

There is, first, that on which it is impossible for us here to form or pronounce any independent opinion at all. The language is said to be saturated with later Hebrew. If it is not as different from that of the older writers, as e.g. the English of Cowper from that of Chaucer, yet the difference is said to be one quite similar in kind. If, says a great authority, a Christian Hebraist of unimpeached orthodoxy, 'if the book of Ecclesiastes was written in the age of Solomon, *there is no history of the Hebrew language*[1].'

Such statements are, I need not say, of great weight. Their weight, of course, depends upon their accuracy; and they are questioned and even strongly denied. Yet I am bound to say that those who question or deny them are, so far as I can ascertain, men who look with a dismay, which I for one do not for one moment share, at the possible result or results of holding the author to be one of a far later date. Independent students—those who are both competent and anxious to give an opinion on language as such, with no ulterior view, looking, as you and I would do, to truth and truth only—seem to me to be more and more coming to one conclusion; and I have nowhere found any suggestion that the whole text, composed originally in a more ancient form of the Hebrew tongue, bears traces of having been recast and modernised.

But behind the question of language, there lies another argument into which you and I can entirely enter, and which, I confess, seems to me to be of the greatest possible weight and interest. Let us forget entirely the style of the Hebrew in the original text, its inflexions, structure, syntax, on which scarcely more than one or two here, perhaps, are

[1] Delitzsch.

competent to judge. Let us consider something else, its contents, its tone, the local colouring, the lights and shades of the age at which he speaks, the scenery which we see in the background behind the speaker as we listen to him.

What shall we see? Weariness, satiety, hatred of life, a low estimate of his fellow-men and fellow-women—a profound melancholy. Well! these are natural enough in a king old before his time, who had tasted all the pleasures of life, and found the after-taste very bitter. Yes, that is possible, no doubt. But it is surely strange that the son of David, he who in his early youth had been so near and dear to his father's God, should have no word to say, not one word, as he recounts the story of his life, of his own early love to God and to his people, a love which comes out so beautifully in the Book of Kings. *I am but a little child*, he had said once, *and how shall I judge this great people*[1]*?* He had asked once not for riches, nor for power, but for wisdom. And you remember the striking words, *Because thou hast not asked for thyself long life, nor riches for thyself, nor the life of thine enemies . . . . lo, I have given thee a wise and understanding heart*[2]. Is it he who in this book holds so cheap the wisdom so freely given, and has no word either of gratitude to the Giver, or of memory or sense that it came from Him? Of repentance, or even of regret for his falling away, he makes no sign. He represents himself as having attained to his marvellous height of wisdom, by his own toil and researches, and this in the deliberate carrying out of a cool and calculating philosophic experiment. Is it too much to say that, if it is Solomon who speaks, it is a Solomon who has forgotten his own past life, alike its good side and its evil? It is no longer Solomon, the righteous judge; nor Solomon, the builder and dedicator of the Temple, which he does not even enumerate among his great works, and of which he will speak as you or I might speak to-day of this or

[1] 1 Kings iii. 7, 8, 9. [2] 1 Kings iii. 11, 12.

of any long-established place of worship. Nor, again, is it Solomon the worshipper, or the sanctioner of the worship, of false Gods. It is one who has forgotten both characters. It is a Solomon in a state of mental eclipse, unable to recall the past in any colour but that which the present lends it. If Solomon is here at all, it is another Solomon than he whom we find in the sacred record.

But this is only one of many arguments. The Solomon of sacred history ruled, till his death, over a great and prosperous empire. His portrait, as painted there, is not that of an artistic and philosophical builder of stately palaces, as one of many experiments in the process of satisfying the selfish, self-inspecting, cravings of his own restless soul. It is that of a great and statesmanlike ruler of men, the shaper under God of a young nation's destinies. Art and commerce sprang into life at his touch. His people felt the blood of a fresh national life thrill within their veins. Wealth flowed into the land. Silver and gold, we read, were as stones in the streets of Jerusalem. Material prosperity grew, to use a well-known phrase, by leaps and bounds. Foreign potentates sought his alliance. Far-off lands sent him their treasures. The picture in the Book of Kings is, perhaps, the very brightest picture of national prosperity which sacred or profane writer has ever placed on record. *Judah and Israel*, we read, *dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig-tree, from Dan even unto Beersheba, all the days of Solomon*[1]. We know that there was a reverse side to the picture; that tribal jealousies still existed; that the devout were alienated by the introduction of foreign worship; that a sumptuous court, and a king's eagerness in pressing on great national works, involved heavy burdens and popular disaffection. And we know how the magnificent fabric of his empire broke up, when the great king was hardly cold in his grave. But the picture which the Preacher will draw in

[1] 1 Kings iv. 25.

these chapters is one which it is almost impossible to fit into the age of Solomon. It is unrelieved by a single touch of patriotism, or of national or of kingly feeling of any kind. Kings are spoken of; but it is as powerful personages to be in every way dreaded and propitiated. Royalty is treated as a regular, necessary, long-established institution. It is apparently regarded with no very friendly eye. The writer will speak, as it were, under his breath, and in language not always easy to decipher. But he will speak as one who has groaned under the misrule of an Oriental despotism, with its succession of low-born and corrupt favourites; its spies in every chamber; its ubiquitous police; its insecurity of property and life; its arbitrariness; its shameful luxury; its corrupt and unjust judges. The Solomon of history left behind him the enduring fame of a righteous judge. With all his faults, he imprinted on his nation's heart the ideal of a national and a beneficent sovereign. His race loved to connect with his name the magnificent picture of the perfect King which still can stir our hearts like a trumpet as we read the 72nd Psalm. Could such a Solomon have spoken, as the speaker in this book will speak, with a melancholy resignation, the resignation of calm despair, of *the place of judgment being filled by wickedness*[1]*; of the tears of the oppressed, who had no comforter*[2]*;* or *of power being always on the side of the oppressor?* Would he have spoken of *slaves being set on horseback, and princes degraded*[3]*;* recalling some scene out of the 'Arabian Nights,' or the revolutions of a Persian court? Would he have darkly hinted at satrap above satrap[4], making appeal for redress useless? Would he, in short, have written verse after verse of latent satire on some worn-out and corrupt, yet still for the present irresistible system of oppression? Was the Turkish administration of yesterday or to-day possible, as a living and present fact, to even the poetic imagination of an actual Solomon?

[1] iii. 16. [2] iv. 1. [3] x. 7. [4] v. 8.

And again, was the question that will recur again and again as we read these chapters, the question of the sad inequalities, and anomalies, and injustices of human life—were these melancholy outlooks into human history—this hopeless view of the organization of society and of the government of the world—this recurring abandonment of any prospect of redress,—were these things natural, possible, in the interval between the glowing, hopeful, trustful Psalms of David, and the zeal and fervour of the Hebrew Prophets? Is there room in the reign of Solomon for this blank era of profound and passionless despair? this forgetfulness of the very existence and position of the Jewish nation? this indifference to its past, this deadness to its future? Do such problems, we might almost ask, as are dealt with in this book, speak to men, have any meaning to men, in the first heyday of a nation's youth? above all to the Jewish nation, while still fired with high hopes, and led onward by the felt presence of its God towards the greatness for which it panted?

To me it seems, I confess, impossible to read verse after verse that will come before us without feeling that they have little or no meaning unless we look on them as the outcome of a time of suffering and oppression. They seem to point steadily to an age when national freedom was gone, national life extinguished for a time; the spirit of freedom dead; the high memories of the past forgotten; the Messianic hopes not yet rekindled; when the God of Hosts seemed far removed; when all around was dark and gloomy; in days, it may be, when Persian or Syrian or Egyptian kings ruled over the land of David as a province of their kingdom, and the hopes of Israel seemed dead and gone—buried and out of sight.

Then, it might well come to pass that the spirit of some son of Israel was stirred within him—in a time when the writing and the reading of books was, as we see by one of the closing verses[1], a familiar thing—to try to reach his

[1] xii. 12.

people's heart, not by spoken word or the stirring address of a Jewish prophet; the day of prophecy was over: not by the music of a Psalm; the Psalmist's harp was silent: not by a great poem like the Book of Job—such poetry had died out of the nation's heart; but by putting forth in this half-inarticulate and ambiguous form a soliloquy or discourse, call it which you will, breathing the very spirit of that later age: its sadness, its languor, its passive and oriental acquiescence, almost lethargy, under suffering. It bears the stamp, from first to last, of dejection, if not of despair. Yet its still unrelinquished, pervading sense of the fear of God as the end of life; its firm hold of the inherent distinction between right and wrong; its refusal, in spite of all that seems to cloud the hope, to part with the conviction of a judgment, a righteous judgment, yet to come; its counsels of activity, patience, cheerfulness, prudence, calmness, sympathy with suffering, stand out amidst the wreck and decay of all around. They stand out often in sharp contrast with what seems at times the prevailing tone of the book itself. It is easy to quote, as we shall see, opposite precepts, conflicting views: scepticism and faith, pessimism and optimism, gloom and brightness, despair and hope. There they stand side by side, and we shall understand, as we read them, how it is that, in the enormous literature that has gathered round these few pages of the Old Testament, there is the profoundest disagreement as to their aim and purpose. We, my friends, will do our best to reach the true meaning of the Preacher's words. We will not attempt to disguise their sombre and despairing side. We will try to realize to the very full the loss of belief in human progress, the eclipse of any sense of a God close at hand to aid, such as nerved the Psalmist, or near at hand to guide, such as fired the Prophet. We will face these things fairly and honestly, not wresting the plain meaning of the Preacher's words, or fastening on a phrase here, a line there, and saying,

behold we have in him a Preacher, before his time, of Christian doctrines, or an anticipator of modern science, or a professor of Christian theology, or a revealer of the life and immortality which were brought to light by Christ. But we will try, reverently and honestly, to reach the meaning, the real meaning, of the Preacher; to catch what higher teaching God's Spirit still kept alive within his heart; and faithfully and heedfully to ask what his place can be in that Sacred Record, to study a fragment of which we have met to-day.

To Him whose education of our race is revealed in that great Record, to the God of Truth, would we consecrate our efforts. His help and blessing we would seek!

[November 15, 1884.]

LECTURE III.

The Prologue. Chapter I. 2–11.

I said enough, when last I spoke here, to indicate the view that will be taken of the authorship and age of the book which we are studying.

I shall presume that we have in it a late, perhaps the very latest, portion of the Old Testament canon; and that the book was written, not in the palmy days of the empire of Solomon, but at a time when the Jewish people, once so full of aspirations to universal empire, always so intolerant of foreign supremacy, was lying beneath the yoke of Persian or Egyptian or Syrian kings; when the Holy Land had become a province, or department, ruled by some Eastern satrap, and suffering from the rapacity and corruption inherent at all times in such government.

And I shall presume that at such a time, one, who shared to the utmost the gloom and dejection of his race, was moved to come forward to bear his part in some interchange of thought between his own sad soul and those to whom the darkness of that hour was a 'darkness that might be felt.' I shall assume also that he clothed his words in the person of the great head and representative of Hebrew wisdom, and I shall glance from time to time at any evidence that points to this view of the date and origin of the book.

And, if this view is at all correct, it will suggest at once some answer to the grave question as to the place which the book holds in the education and spiritual development of the human race. The question will come before us again and

again as we study its contents. But I would answer at once that it seems to me to represent that stage in the history of the chosen people when the moral and spiritual fervour, with which the sons of Abraham had been instinct without a parallel in the history of the world, had died out under the stern pressure of overwhelming adversity. It was, we may believe, a time when the early and simpler belief that obedience to God's law and outward prosperity must necessarily go together, a belief long rudely shaken, had passed away; when the very agony which its disturbance had caused, as figured in the passionate cries of Job, had given place to calm despair; it is the hour when the prophet's cry, 'Verily, Thou art a God that hidest Thyself[1],' had become the expression of something more than a momentary pang; when all that Judaism offered, had it been a final dispensation, seemed exhausted, and the light that was to shine into the darkness had not yet dawned. It is the chill and gloom in the sick man's chamber before the first breeze of morning stirs, or the first beam of dawn glimmers in the east.

Be this as it may, I will now invite you all alike: you who cannot perhaps part with the conviction that we have here the moody voice of the kingly Solomon, anticipating in the full pulse of the nation's youth the gloom and despondency of its sadness and decline; and you who can accept with me the confessedly modern, but as it seems to me the more probable view, that we have in it the voice of some member of the Jewish Church, stirred in a far later age to give utterance to the thoughts that worked within him in days of decadence and decay; I will invite you, each and all, to turn to its instructive pages, and to study with me, so far as the occasional obscurity of its language will permit, these strange and tangled meditations which paint so well the darker side

[1] Isaiah xlv. 15.

of human life, and the gloom of the individual spirit; the need, let me add, to both alike of a Consoler and Restorer.

Let us begin at once with his opening words, VANITY OF VANITIES, saith the Preacher, VANITY OF VANITIES: ALL IS VANITY. He strikes at once the key note to a vein of thought, never retracted, never wholly overborne, that will recur again and again as we follow him in his musings. Listen to the stately and solemn accents in which he clothes his thoughts in what we may call the Prologue to his sad soliloquy. He begins in verse 2, *Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities: all is vanity.* There is his text. *What profit hath a man*—hath man—*of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?* There is man the toiler. Then he looks at man as face to face with nature. Listen to him through the next five verses. *One generation passeth away and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.* In the ninth verse he turns to man, as looked on in the light of history. *The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it is said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.* Such are the lines of profound and unbroken melancholy—of more than melancholy, of weariness and despair—with which the book opens. Everything on earth, everything without exception, is hollow

and empty—man's labour, and man himself, most of all. The sight of nature and the study of history are alike stale, flat, wearisome, and unprofitable.

Shall we take his words in hand, and say 'such language cannot mean what it says?' Shall we set to work to explain it away, and write into each dismal verse some pious sentiment, or some Christian doctrine? Shall we imagine ourselves by such a process to be doing honour to what we read, by making its language mean something wholly different from, or precisely contrary to, its plain significance? We turn to commentators, Jewish and Christian, and we find ourselves in quite another atmosphere to that which broods around the speaker. Words have lost their meaning; sighs are no longer sighs; despair is no more despair; the saddest utterances of the human heart have become merely sparkling and ingenious riddles. Our ears are filled with hollow verbiage, fictitious sorrows, artificial moans, assumed dejection.

Let me give you at once one or two instances of the manner in which this 'exceeding deep and bitter' moan has been dealt with for centuries.

That 'all things'—all without exception—'are vanity' means, we shall be told at once, nothing more than the pious maxim that without God's blessing nothing human will avail. That 'all man's toil beneath the sun is profitless' means, says a great Christian Father[1], that work done for ourselves is profitless, but work done for Him Who made the sun, and Who is above the sun, is fruitful. That 'generations pass and the earth abides' teaches us, says the Jewish Rabbi, that the proud and the wicked are overthrown at last, and the poor and the meek, whom they have trodden beneath their feet as men tread on earth, will in the end be raised up, and survive their oppressors. The sun that rises and sets, and rises again, is not, says the same Christian expositor, the sun that marches through the natural heaven, but the

[1] St. Augustine.

Sun of Righteousness; and we have here a prophecy of the coming nativity, of the Death, and Burial, and Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ our Lord. Those streams that flow for ever to the ocean, the brooks that murmur seawards, and suggest to the saddened consciousness of this weary watcher the thought, common to that age with this, that as 'men come and go' they will 'flow on for ever,' are only mentioned, we are told, to remind us that, as those sweet rivulets are lost at last in the wandering fields of barren brine, so guilty joys and sensual pleasures must needs end at last in everlasting bitterness. That 'there is no new thing under the sun' is not the weary groan of a soul, to which all the history of the past has lost its savour: it is merely a phrase used to convey to us the very narrow and misleading, but by no means novel or unfamiliar maxim, that outside the sacred record we shall find no solid or instructive teaching in the story of our race. That as the past is forgotten, so the memory of the present will fade and perish, is merely a mode of saying that as one guilty and rebellious race, such as Amalek, has been already exterminated, so those which share its guilt will in due time meet the doom which they deserve.

Need I go on? I have not, you will believe, paused in what is far more interesting, to read to you these characteristic interpretations, merely to excite a smile, but with a deliberate purpose. For whole centuries, Jew and Christian vied with each other in dealing with the whole of this book in a similar manner, and the result was two-fold.

First, all the difficulties, all the problems, which the book stirs, were effectually disposed of. Does the writer seem to say that all God's world is wholly evil? Or, further on, that the gift of life itself is not a blessing, but a curse, 'a life of nothings; nothing worth?' The answer is ready. It is only the evil in the world of which he speaks. It is only the life of the wicked which is so full of pettiness and full of misery. Does he speak, as speak he will, of man and beast

lying down to die alike? He merely means that beast-like men, the creatures of their senses, can have no part in the true life hereafter. Does he seem to bid us 'eat and drink' cheerfully, 'for to-morrow we die?' He is, in fact, in words beyond his age, bidding the Christian use freely the unspeakable gift of the blessed Sacrament of Communion with his Lord. In short, all that is startling, all that is perplexing—I had almost said, all that is characteristic—in his language, is merely a flimsy veil. It is assumed to hide something very different, the ordinary truisms, the habitual, we might almost say the conventional, teaching of a pious reciter of trite and well-worn religious maxims. The 'Preacher' is not a voice out of the dark pre-Christian night, but just one more *Preacher*, in not the highest or most honoured sense of the word. 'There is nothing new under the sun,' there is certainly nothing new to us in this somewhat tame and commonplace discourse.

And secondly, all the real interest, as well as all the real difficulty, of the book evaporates under such treatment. This moody soliloquy, these heart-stirring confessions, these riddling utterances, running through the various forms of despairing reflections, cheerful encouragement, worldly and prudential maxims, political aphorisms, religious warnings; wearing at one time the guise of earnest but troubled prose, where we seem to see language struggling to convey thoughts too big for its framework, at another rising to the sad heights of the poetry of despair; this book, of which it was said long ago that it had no companion, no fellow, in the whole Bible, becomes merely a storehouse of well-contrived riddles, where homely truths, great, some of them, in their naked simplicity and dignity, lose their force by being wrapped up in meaningless conundrums. The book becomes no longer a serious study for earnest men, but a pastime for grown-up children, a playground for trifling pedants.

Let us put away, once for all, this mode of treatment, and come back to these opening words, stern and grim and forbidding as they seem. We will do this in the conviction that they come too clearly from the speaker's heart to be explained away; that he is in too serious a frame for trifling; that whatever be the desolation of his mood, one thing at least he can do—he can say what he means, and mean what he says.

He looks out then, in verse 3, on this busy human race —busy then, busier, it may be, now. We too can think of a toiling world, larger than he dreamed of; those patient Hindoos, these thrifty Frenchmen, those weary Fellaheen, those laborious Chinese, these masses at our own doors; the hum and roar of machinery on this side the Atlantic and on that; these toiling millions, this incessant drudgery; the industrial triumphs, the feverish haste, the eager thought, the philanthropic, the missionary zeal of our own place and time. *What profit*, he asks, hath *man from all his toil, that he toils* (so runs the Hebrew) *beneath the sun?* What profit? what result? In Hebrew, even more than in English, the question suggests its own sad answer.

But the Preacher is not content with this gloomy question, or with the reply that it challenges. He pursues the theme unrelentingly. Generations, he says, in the fourth and following verses, come and go; their lives die out like fading sparks. *Generation passeth away, and generation cometh.* They pass, *but the earth abideth;* the earth, and dumb unchanging Nature. The unwearied sun *pants*, he says in his own language, through his daily round, unmoved by the wreck of human lives. The winds revolve and circle and shift and blow with a hateful monotony of change. What to them we seem to hear him say, those stormy seas and cruel tornados, those 'sinking ships and praying hands'? Downwards from their unexhausted sources flow the streams through time-worn channels to a changeless sea, a sea whose shores are strewn with the wrecks of empires. All nature

tells of this weary, unvarying round. *No tongue*, he says, in verse 8, *can tell, no eye can see, no ear can catch, the full range of this depressing, self-repeating, endless cycle.* There is no advance, no progress. And the page of History tells the same tale. He sees no onward movement there; no evolution or development in Nature, no 'one increasing purpose running through the ages,' in the story of mankind. It is the same tale, stirring, it might be, if it stood alone, dulled and blunted and made tame by incessant repetition. There is nothing new, nothing great. All that is human repeats itself, and sinks into the great gulf of oblivion and decay. The earth abides, the sun rises, the rivers run, the winds blow, the sea rolls, man lives his brief day, and dies; all things are forgotten; the earth abides. *Vanity of vanities: all is vanity.* It is a dreary world!

Can anything in the world be sadder than his mood? What a gap we feel at once between such language and the Psalmist's exulting joy in nature: *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth His handiwork*[1]; his words who sees *the sun going forth as a bridegroom, and rejoicing as a strong man to run a race;* or his who, after looking round on creation, cries, *Lord, how manifold are Thy works; in wisdom hast Thou made them all; the earth is full of thy riches*[2]. What a difference from the language of the Shepherd King, as he pours out his full heart in gladness at the familiar sight of the starry heavens. They suggest to him, as well they may, his own insignificance. But they do not 'burn and brand his nothingness' into his soul. *When I consider Thy heavens*[3], *the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained; What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?* 'But for all that,' he cries, 'Thou hast made man scarce less than divine; Thou hast crowned Thy creature man with glory and with honour; and for all that,' *O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Thy name in all the earth! Thou that hast set Thy glory above*

[1] Ps. xix. [2] Ps. civ. 24. [3] Ps. viii.

the heavens. What a difference also, if we turn to our own day, between his weary and bitter mood and that of the most mournful tones of modern poetry. Nature does not touch—does not seem to touch—and sadden him by the very sense of its unutterable and mysterious beauty. There is no trace of the 'pain of finite souls that yearn' to something unapproachable, unattainable. There is no echo of the feeling with which a Keats listened to the music of the nightingale, and sighed for 'easeful death.' There is none of that with which a Shelley lay down in the Bay of Naples, and, overborne by the contrast between the boundless loveliness around him and the want of peace within, called on the sea to 'breathe over his dying brain its last monotony.' The 'innocent brightness of a new-born day' that filled Wordsworth with a thoughtful joy, is to him mere weariness. The sunrise is no 'glorious birth,' but only a type of nature's dull, remorseless pulse, beating and beating through endless time, while men die out, decay, and are forgotten. Nor, on the other hand, does he read in nature what modern eyes have read, the stern and ruthless law working out the advancement of all organic life, through pain and suffering, through hunger, strife, and death. To him all creation is stationary, or revolves in an endless, weary, cruel, unmeaning circle.

Or shall we pause for one moment to contrast his view of the felt meaninglessness of the history of mankind, of its dull flux and reflux, its weary ebb and flow, with that of the Psalmists of his race? *I have considered the days of old*[1], says one of these, *the years of ancient times.* I will remember the works of the Lord,—*The years of the right hand of the Most High,*—of Him *whose way is in the sea and whose path in the great waters. Who led His people like sheep by the hand of Moses and Aaron;* Who was known to them by the title of 'The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob.' In him who speaks to us to-day we see no interest in the

[1] Ps. lxxvii. 5, 10, 19, 20.

past, no hope for the future. Of the two great factors in the life of Judaism, the inspiring memories of earlier days, and the eager anticipation of a greater day yet to come, we find, and we shall find, no trace. The child of a race from which, after the flesh, He was to be born under whom *old things were to pass away*, who was *to make all things new*[1], he tells us that the story of his people has run its course, and has nothing fresh to offer; all changes have been rung; there is and will be nothing new.

Such is the mood in which our Preacher meets us as we pass under the shadow of his teaching; need I say that we feel the air around him thick and heavy? Need I say that it is a mood fatal to all exertion, to all activity of an ennobling or uplifting kind? Enthusiasm, self-denial, high aspirations, earnest devotion to an unselfish cause; the courage and the calmness that spring from the sense that no good work can ever wholly perish, and that the life of the soul that is in union with the Eternal Spirit will endure, when the earth has become a tenantless globe and the sun's fires are cold—these are plants that cannot grow in such a soil. They are incompatible with such a frame of mind, with such a basis on which to build our lives.

Yet we know that it is a mood, a frame, a state, a temperament, call it what we will, to which, in one form or another, the human soul is at all times liable. It is a malady of our very being, a sad prerogative of our nature—this profound, unappeasable, irresistible, mysterious melancholy, taking at times the form of a spiritual paralysis, a moral apathy; this sense of unsatisfiedness, incompleteness on the one hand, and a turning from all that might fill the void on the other.

> 'A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
> A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
> Which finds no natural outlet, no relief
> In word, or sigh, or tear[2].'

[1] 2 Cor. v. 17.

[2] S. T. Coleridge.

Shall we, my friends, be so startled, so offended, that some place is found for such a mood, for such a frame, in that sacred book which traces the dealings with our spirits of the Father of all spirits? Or shall we rather be thankful that, in the great record of the spiritual history of the chosen and typical race, some place should be kept for the sigh of defeated hopes, for the gloom of the soul vanquished by the sense of the anomalies and mysteries of human life? It seems to me that we may well rejoice that, at a season which tells us of the coming of the great Consoler, we should be reminded not only of those wounds which He would have us try to heal or console, its diseases, its afflictions, its destitution, its ignorance, its misery, its open graves, its desolate hearts, but of its vaguer and more impenetrable sadness, to which we so often minister in vain. '*Come unto Me*,' He said, '*all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest;*' and he who speaks to us to-day was one of those who carried a heavy burden. The burden will grow heavier. He has shown us as yet but the twilight of his soul. His hour of midnight is yet to come. For him, also, and for those who in any measure feel, or have felt, with him, there is, be sure, a larger and a deeper sympathy than man can offer; in even a wider sense than that of the Psalmist, the human spirit may say, *Why art thou so full of heaviness, oh my soul, and why so disquieted within me? Put thy trust in God, for I will yet thank him, who is the help of my countenance and my God*[1].

[1] Ps. xlii. 11.

[November 22, 1884.]

LECTURE IV.

The Title. Chapter I. 12—II. 11.

I come back for a short space to-day to the few words with which the book opens; to that which, in a modern work, would form its title-page—to the first verse of Chapter I. *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.* Of the second portion of that title-verse I have spoken already; I will now try to interest you for a few moments on what precedes it; on the phrase, *The words of the Preacher.*

The word here translated by 'The Preacher,' is one which will meet us no less than seven times in the twelve chapters which we have to consider. I have already reminded you that it is, in the original language, one and the same word as that to translate which the word Ecclesiastes has been borrowed by our translators from the Septuagint, or Greek translation of the Old Testament. The latter word has thus, though a purely Greek word, in rare use, and of not absolutely certain meaning, passed into familiar English usage. The two words then, you will remember, *Ecclesiastes*, used as the ordinary title, and *the Preacher*, which takes its place in the body of the work, are renderings of the same Hebrew word. And this Hebrew word, *Koheleth*, is itself a puzzle, an almost insoluble puzzle. It occurs nowhere else, and its meaning therefore can only be inferred or conjectured from that of kindred words. It has been even suggested, and there is nothing alien to the analogy of later Hebrew literature in the theory, that it may have been coined by the writer to convey some enigmatic meaning, the key to

which has been wholly lost. It is clearly a noun, or, to speak more accurately, a participle equivalent to a noun, derived from an existing verb. It is strangely enough a feminine noun, representing possibly, as do also our own feminine personifications of Truth, Justice, Charity, Temperance, Faith, an abstract idea rather than a definite person. But into these abstruse and subtle questions, as to the sometimes strange significance of feminine words in Hebrew and other languages, you will not, I am sure, care for me to enter. The Hebrew word is interpreted by many of the best authorities, as a *gatherer* or *caller together*, an *assembler*, or *uniter* of men. Hence it was that a term, signifying in his own tongue The Preacher, was chosen by Luther for his own great translation. It was borrowed from him by our English translators. I need not remind you how familiar men were, in Germany and in England alike, at the era of the Reformation, with the power of preaching, of pronouncing, i.e. public discourses, before large gatherings of men and women, in spreading the revival, as in the first foundation, of Christian teaching. It is still, as we know, a power in the world. Yet we see at once that, as applied to this book, the term suggests perhaps somewhat too modern an image ; at all events that its language is hardly that of a spoken address on a religious subject to a popular audience, such as we connect with the idea of preaching. We can scarcely look on what we shall read as a sermon, or collection of short sermons. Indeed the writer seems at times deliberately to refuse to preach to us, to put aside the most marked opportunities for so doing.

It would be out of place to enter further into a disquisition on so difficult a subject, on which no one can decide with certainty, and which would have little interest for many here. You will be content to take it, on the authority of others, that the Hebrew word, which gives its title to the book, is extremely obscure; but that the most prominent and most probable interpretations are, that it signifies ;

First, and for this sense there seems to be much evidence, one who *assembles* an audience in order to address them,—*a Lecturer*, or, in a certain sense of the term, *a Preacher*. In this sense I shall venture to retain the word.

Secondly, one who frequents, or takes part in, such an assembly—*a Debater* or *Discusser*.

Thirdly, one who unites a body of men not to each other, but to God; indicating thus very closely a supposed purpose of the book, to reconcile God's people to their divine Lord—a *Uniter* or *Reconciler*.

Fourthly, it is held that the word *Koheleth* bears, if I may be allowed to use the language of grammar, no longer an *active*, but a *passive* sense; and that it signifies one who is *reunited* to God; the Solomon, who has by many been supposed to be making in these chapters the recantation of his errors and the confession of his sins.

Lastly, it has been held to mean nothing more than the *Collector* or *Gatherer*, not of men, but of truths; to signify thus the various maxims, views, aphorisms, and thoughts, embodied in the work of which it is the title.

I will go no further, though I might greatly enlarge the list of conflicting interpretations set before us by students of the Hebrew language. Yet it may interest you to have heard these five interpretations: the *Preacher* of our own version; the *Debater;* the *Reconciler*—these three are not, you will notice, for practical purposes, so very far apart—and, besides these, two wholly different, the *Reconciled* and the *Collector*.

And it may interest you also, in connexion with these different views as to the meaning of the very title of the book, to indicate the main views which have been founded on that title as to its purpose and object.

I need say no more of a theory which I have already put fully and fairly before you, that it is the work of one who, had he lived in the nineteenth century, would have not flinched from calling himself an avowed sceptic and pessimist.

I set aside also those which regard it as a mere series of words, in themselves insignificant, but used as a veil for conveying in a string of enigmas a system of Jewish, or Christian, teaching quite apart from their apparent sense.

But those who are content to let the author speak, as other authors, within or without the circle of inspired writers, are wont to speak, take in the main three different views of its contents and object, each implied in their translation of its title-page.

For those to whom the word translated 'Preacher' bears a sense answering to that of our 'Collector,' the book contains the thoughts, not of one man, but two or far more. It is a sort of dialogue or conference, recalling, as I said before, 'The Two Voices' of our own poet, Tennyson; and thus all that seems gloomy, or sceptical, or fatalistic, or epicurean, in the chapters before us, is easily ascribed to one or other of the unnamed interlocutors; all that is of another character comes from one of firmer faith, who utters from time to time words of higher wisdom.

Ingenious as is the view, and ready as is the solution which it seems to present to many of the difficulties of the book, I can find, I confess, no foundation whatever in its plan or structure for such a theory.

To others, who lean rather to the view that 'the Preacher' is here one who *is uniting his people to God*, the title is taken as signifying the express purpose of the book. It is looked on as the attempt in dark and gloomy days of one who shares the darkness and the gloom, to lead his people to the dim light that still remains; to bid them not despair, but enjoy cheerfully what is given day by day, and trust in the certainty —the certainty in spite of all appearances to the contrary— of ultimate retribution.

Doubtful as is this interpretation of the title, its upholders have at all events seized on one leading feature of the book.

Some, I need hardly say, carry its aim much higher. They

speak of the book as written to cheer the heart of conquered and despairing Israel, by holding up to them the solution of all their doubts and difficulties in the hope of Immortality and of a judgment beyond the grave; of a solution in another world—not here, but there—of all life's problems. By many also the book has been treated as the humble recantation of the penitent Solomon, now *united* and reconciled to the God whom he had abandoned. It has been spoken of as a 'dirge,' a penitential dirge over his errors; an account of his wanderings to and fro in a search after happiness, and an attempt to point his people to the true source of rest and peace. It thus gives the history of his return from 'cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water,' to the one unfailing well-spring of wisdom and of happiness.

If I may once more indicate my own view, I cannot for a moment look on the book as a dialogue: still less as an uncompleted, unordered, medley of fragmentary and conflicting maxims. Nor, again, can I venture to speak to you of it as the outcome of a penitent and contrite spirit, as something to be taken to the very heart of Christendom, side by side with the 51st Psalm. Of repentance, of the sense of sin, of the yearning for forgiveness, I see no trace. Nor, again, can I accept the view that it is an essay or debate, however informal, on the nature of true happiness; still less that it is a gracious revelation of Christian truths; or an invitation to a life of ascetic self-denial; or a contrast drawn between the hollowness of all that is seen and temporal, and the enduring nature of what is spiritual and eternal.

I need hardly tell you that if I thought with a distinguished modern writer, whose facile pen has ranged through such a vast circle of the persons and subjects nearest and dearest to the heart of humanity, that it is merely an Epicurean essay, written by some cold-blooded forerunner of the Sadducee who was to come, on the hollowness of everything except the moderated and calculated engagement of the passing hour;

and that it had somehow been permitted by blundering Rabbis to find a place in the Sacred Canon, I should not have attempted to draw your attention to it in this house, sacred to the worship of a God revealed to us in the Man of Sorrows. Need I say here once more that, whatever the meaning of this mysterious title, the book seems to me to paint in dark yet most instructive colours, an hour in the history of the pre-christian age when one great article in the simple creed of the early Jewish Church, its belief in a fully retributive system here below, had been shaken to its base; shaken alike by the experience of a more complex stage of society, and by the crushing of God's people under heathen powers? Let any one here read on his return the 44th Psalm. He will see what clouds must have seemed to pass between God's face and the soul of the devout Hebrew. At such a time came a voice, evoking from the distant past the name of the great type and master of human wisdom, sharing all the gloom that had settled on the race; echoing its deepest murmurs in accents of unsurpassable, immeasurable melancholy, and yet, as we shall find, seeing even behind the darkest clouds, some faint gleams of light; repelling fanaticism on one side, denial of God on the other; holding firm, even in the shipwreck of hope, to some fragments of cheerfulness, even in the bankruptcy of faith, to two things which contain the germ of all that is most precious to our race, the belief in God and the belief in Duty. Was it the last time in the history of mankind, that even these have been of priceless value?

Let us now follow the account which the writer gives from the twelfth verse onwards—gives, you will notice, in the person of one who speaks of himself as king, not in the present but in the past, over Israel, and that in Jerusalem, as though opposed to the Northern Kingdom—of the first of his experiences of the hollowness of life, and his first full comment on the text, 'VANITY OF VANITIES, ALL IS VANITY.'

I the Preacher, he begins, *was king over Israel in Jerusalem.*

And I gave my heart, he adds, *to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven.*

He gave, he tells us, his whole mind to the search after wisdom in every range of subject beneath the skies. To the pursuit, he means, it would seem, of some clear light that would harmonize and reconcile all the contradictions and anomalies of life, and satisfy all the longings of his soul. He adds words which remind us that his tone is no less removed from the yearning enquiries after God of the Psalmist, or of Job, than from the enthusiasm and delight of the modern student of nature or of science. This weary search for knowledge, he says, is a task imposed on man; to ask and ask, to seek and seek, *this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.* 'This sore travail' is God's gift; not the power to discover truth, but the imperious instinct that bids him return and return, generation after generation, to the everlasting riddle. And what was the result? I looked round, he tells us in verse 14, at all that was done beneath the sun; I considered the whole range of human life. *I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit;* or rather, *all is* mere *breath* or *vapour;* mere *striving after*[1] or *feeding*, as some translate it, *on, empty wind.* And all efforts to set right the tangled skein of life are vain. *That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.* What is absent, missing, or lost, cannot be recovered, or held as your own. And so, as the result of all, I turned to my own heart, and said, how vain the search! *I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit* (striving after

[1] 'A striving after wind,' R. V.

wind). I, who have stood on such vantage ground, who have accumulated such stores of the results of study and thought, have gained only the sad experience that all this is hollow and unsatisfying; that wider vision brings wider sights of sadness, and added knowledge is added sorrow. Wisdom, the wisdom which consists in knowledge, brings no balm to the disquiet of the human heart. *For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow* (verse 18).

The language is, as you see at once, that of something more than a passing mood of weariness. It has no resemblance to that in which the greatest genius that sleeps within this Abbey spoke of himself, as gathering shells and pebbles on the shore of the great ocean, yet unexplored. It does not echo the thought ever present to the mind of the true philosopher, *quantum est quod nescimus!* 'how vast the field of our ignorance.' It runs far beyond the inevitable depression which, even amidst 'the intoxicating draughts' of fresh triumphs in the domain of natural science, the infinity of knowledge lays upon her students. Need I say how far it is from the language of St. Paul, *we know in part, we prophesy in part, but when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away?* I will not divert you from the sense of its full bitterness by putting before you the strange comments by which Jew or Christian has converted it into a commonplace series of remarks on the unsatisfactoriness of mere human knowledge as compared to higher teaching. The words are the words of a saddened soul, sad with an infinite sadness. Let us sympathise with that hour of darkness, not turn it into a well-balanced and measured utterance of edifying maxims, which any ordinarily instructed Christian man or woman might quote, with the misjudging piety of the friends of Job, to preach down the tumult of some restless brain or rebellious spirit.

But he has not yet sounded the depths of disappointment and despair. Let us follow him,—wearing, as he will, for

one step further, the mask of Solomon,—to the next stage in his sad experience. He has tried knowledge, and found nothing to satisfy his heart's cravings, and now he will turn elsewhere. We open the second chapter; we read, *I said in mine heart* (or, rather, to mine heart), *Go to now, I will prove thee* (try thee) *with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure;* and he tells at once the sad result before he has filled up the sketch; *and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?* Of mirth and laughter, he says, personifying each, I said the one is madness, the other meaningless and profitless. But having said this—for the sense of hollowness is too acute for him to delay the saying it—he tells at length the story. He recounts to us in the following verses how at first he resolved with his own heart, as we should say, with his soul, to which as our own poet in that 'Palace of Art,' which recalls at every step, and is the best of commentaries on, the whole passage, he ascribes a distinct personality—he resolved to give himself, his flesh, as he says more plainly, to enjoyment and banqueting. *I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine;* yet not for a moment to the coarse revels of the North, or to the refined gluttony of consular or imperial Rome, *yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom;* still, with the reins of my courser held firm, I resolved to go so far only in the folly of a life of enjoyment as to see whether it could bring any real solution to the riddles of life, any true solace for the short-lived sons of men; *and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.* As we read his words we may pause for a moment to note the measured and calm accents in which he records his experience. There is not, there will not be, the slightest trace of any touch of penitence or remorse. It is the autobiography of a self-inspecting philosophic spirit trying experiments on itself, and reporting the result with a sorrowful impartiality.

But to proceed. He goes on with his story in the fourth and four following verses. He tells us how he opened and trod every avenue of refined and artistic enjoyment. He added palace to palace, like the historic Solomon, or the Royal builder of Versailles; he planted vineyards and parks and gardens, with irrigating lakes and streams, and wide forests, and all the accessories of kingly luxury. And a vast retinue of purchased or home-reared slaves waited on his will, and gold and silver gleamed in his palaces, and all the embellishments of life which are traditional with kings and princes. The singer, male and female, with the musician, was there to charm his ear, and he adds (verse 8) a single phrase which may or may not, for the best authorities are greatly divided, include a reference—at most it is a passing one—to his harem of wives[1]; and he crowns the enumeration by telling us in the ninth verse what, if the historic Solomon were speaking, the first Hebrew king who ruled throughout his reign in the Jebusite fastness which his father had won, would have little meaning; he tells us that none in the history of Jerusalem had amassed such ample materials for happiness as he; adding that wisdom was with him all the time; guided him in the pursuit of pleasure, never abandoned him in its enjoyment. *So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour* (vv. 9, 10).

He had kept back that human soul, on which he pictures himself as experimenting, from no source of well-ordered enjoyment. He had done his best to win some portion of that fruit of human toil which, in his prologue, he had pronounced unattainable. And what was the end of all? I paused he tells us, and gathered up my faculties to consider the result. I looked round at all, all that I had built, and bought, and

[1] See Ch. ii. 8 in R. V. with the marginal notes.

planted, and gathered from foreign lands, all that wealth and toil and art had poured into my lap. What was their value when possessed?

Behold all was vanity and vexation of spirit, vanity and feeding upon wind. Every desire had been fully gratified, and all in vain. He tells us this very simply, with a pathetic simplicity. He does not try to track his failure to its source, or tell us why, or how, or where, he failed. He, the Preacher, as we style him, does not moralise—still less preach—he just paints the picture of his soul's sad wanderings, of the baffled effort of a human heart, and passes on. *Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun* (v. 11).

And so far, the thread of the discourse runs clear. There is no tangle or disarray, and the person, or personation, of the son of David stands out marked and distinct. Soon these helps will be taken from us; the figure of Solomon will gradually but entirely disappear: another and a sadder than Solomon will pass before us.

Yet, just as in the Book of Job, it is the hasty reader who is content to confine himself to the story, the clear and touching story, of the book's short introduction and its shorter close, and by doing so to omit those forty chapters which contain the real and essential subject of the book, so we, I think, shall do well to trace out the view of life put forward in the chapters which follow this introduction. We shall have to follow it through somewhat, we must confess, of a maze and labyrinth to which we cannot always discover a clue. But we may find it for all that a task full of interest. It will suggest to us, as we go on, question after question of exceeding urgency and weight. It will enlarge the range of our sympathies; it will aid some among us to sympathise with, to comprehend and feel for, the difficulties and conclusions of many of our living contemporaries, as well as to enter into the troubles of a heart that once

beat as our hearts beat, and has been dust for centuries. It may aid others among us to realize the infinite value of truths, of words, of teaching, that may have become dulled through their very familiarity. As we face steadily the successive phases of a wisdom that has gone the round of the world under the name of Solomon, we shall see in it a record of thoughts and troubles that belong not only to that gloomy age, and we shall turn with fresh thankfulness to Him Who brought a fresh spring of youth to a worn out world; Who said of Himself 'a greater than Solomon is here.'

[November 29, 1884.]

LECTURE V.

Chapter II. 12–26.

We left our Preacher—if, subject to the reservations already made, we may still accept the title—we left him speaking in the person of King Solomon, and uttering words of profound sadness. He had tried, as we saw, to find contentment and happiness, first in the search after knowledge, and next in the pursuit of enjoyment. Both alike had failed him.

The answer that had come back to his own question, *What profit hath man of all his toil?* to the same question, in its modern form, *Is life worth living?* had been a disastrous one. *Then I looked*, he told us, *on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun* (chap. ii. 11).

Hitherto, it has not been a very difficult task to follow the speaker's meaning. The very fact that he has spoken in the name of a distinctly-recognised person, with whose individual history we are more or less familiar, and that he has preserved something of one side, at least, of the historical characteristics of the historical Solomon, has supplied a framework, on the lines of which his reflections have been set out, in the form of what we may call a fragment of those autobiographical reminiscences which rarely fail to interest the reader. But this framework will soon be abandoned. The scaffolding, it has been well said, which supported for a time the growing structure, will be removed, and the plan on which it was commenced will be exchanged for another. We, as we read our Preacher's words, shall feel like those who, after walking

on a solid and well-marked highway, are left to find their course across an almost trackless moorland.

And you will feel too, I doubt not, for the difficulties of him who is to act, in some sense, as your guide. He will have often to keep entirely and resolutely in the background the result of laborious hours and perplexing study. He will have to resist the temptation to pause too long, and to waste your energies and his own in straining to recover the dim sense of individual verses, or half verses, to which commentators of equal authority have attached irreconcilable meanings. And besides this, he will find it almost impossible to ask you to accept unreservedly any of the ingenious attempts to convert the coming chapters into a methodical and orderly treatise, working out with distinct purpose a single and well-defined religious or philosophical problem. The mere record of such attempts on the part of Fathers, Rabbis, Divines, Preachers, Poets, Critics, might form an interesting chapter in literary history.

I shall therefore be content to treat as shortly as possible, without entirely passing over them, individual difficulties of interpretation and verbal obscurities. I shall only touch on them where great and vital questions are involved. You would, I feel sure, prefer that I should try rather to aid you to gather up, where possible, the clue to the various—very various—lines of thought which will now come before us. You would wish me, above all, to place before you a faithful picture of the real and genuine sentiments and teaching of the book; to draw out what its author really says, as in verse after verse he pours forth the reflections, sometimes clear as day, sometimes wrapped in darkness, always coloured with the sombre hue of some dark hour in the history of his race —as, to use the language of a Jewish commentator[1], he 'thinks aloud' the thoughts that are in his heart.

Let us answer the call which is implied, as some hold, in

[1] David Friedlander, quoted by Ginsburg, p. 80.

the name which he assumes. Let us draw near and listen to this 'Assembler' of his fellow-men.

The section which follows that of which I spoke last time is, setting aside two short clauses to which we have lost the key, full of interest.

It begins at the 12th verse of chapter ii. *I turned myself*, he says, after these two sad defeats, *to behold*, to consider, i. e. *wisdom*, and also *madness and folly*.

Whether by 'madness and folly' he means, as his words used just before seem to imply, the pursuit of pleasure, may possibly be questioned. But, at all events, it is clear that, instead of renewing once more the vain and toilsome pursuit of knowledge, he sets himself to consider calmly the relative value of Wisdom in its largest sense; wisdom practical, and wisdom speculative, and its opposite, which he calls folly. *I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly.*

I pass lightly over an obscure half-verse, with its many conflicting interpretations. Let us accept doubtfully one which comes nearest to our own version: *Who can do this*, he asks in the second part of verse 12, *otherwise, or better than King Solomon has already done it? Then I saw*, he says in the 13th verse—I convinced myself—*that Wisdom excelleth Folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.* You will remember what a high, what a royal place is assigned to Wisdom in portions of the Old Testament; how much of all that is good and holy, as well as all that is prudent, the word involves. You may recall the striking passages in which it is personified, almost deified, in the Book of Proverbs[1], and again in Job[2]. You may remember how, outside the circle of the Canonical books, there was a whole 'literature of Wisdom,' of which the Books of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus are types. You will not forget the uses made of the word by our Lord and by His Apostle, a Hebrew of the Hebrews[3].

[1] Prov. i. 20; viii, ix. [2] Job xxviii. 12–28.
[3] St. Matt. xi. 19; St. James iii, 17.

And you will note also the figure by which is expressed here the excellence of Wisdom, by *light* as opposed to *darkness*. There could be no stronger contrast to the darkness-hating Oriental mind. You know how often, how incessantly, we might say, they are set against one another, as types of all that is most opposite, alike in the Old Testament and the New. Need I quote that familiar parable where the unprofitable servant is cast out from the lighted and festal hall to the 'outer darkness?'

Yes! I felt sure, he says, in spite of all, that wisdom is a gain; that he who has it has the gift of eye-sight—a precious gift. We, my friends, have been reminded but lately of its value by the very courage and energy which replaced its loss[1]. He who has it not walks in darkness. *The wise man's eyes*, he adds, *are in his head, but the fool walketh in darkness*. It is one of the many double, parallel, sayings, proverbs in couplets, which will come before us.

And yet, and yet, vast, he says, as is the difference which I felt forced to see between them; splendid as are the charms of Wisdom, unlovely as is the face of Folly, there rose within me a sense that poisoned all, a thought that bred despair.

For a little space the wise man seems, yea is, endowed with a gift, a priceless gift, denied to the other, the fool. For a little space, but, ah! coupled in our own Bibles by the conjunction *and*, and brought within the compass of the same fourteenth verse, come words almost tragic in their simplicity, *and*[2] *I myself perceived also that one event happeneth*, one end cometh, *to them all. Then I said in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise?* Ah! what avails wisdom, when wisdom and folly lead alike to 'that dark inn, the grave?' *Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity*. For it is not only that

[1] The reference was to the then recent death of Mr. Fawcett, the late lamented Postmaster-General.

[2] 'and yet,' R. V.

the wise man lies down and dies with the fool, but the wisdom which that 'sore travail' of his soul has gained seems to him, in his bitter mood, to pass away with the flickering torch of life, to pass for ever and for ever. *For there is no remembrance*, he goes on in the next verse, *of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool* (ver. 16). Not decay only, but forgetfulness, is his portion. The shadow of death lies dark and cold on the thinker's soul. It is a burden that makes life heavy. He is not thinking so much of death as the divider; not of its breakings off, its cuttings short, its baffling disappointments, its heart-piercing separations, which were being touched on by a master hand even while we met here last Saturday[1], but of its blank obliterations, its wiping out of all life's work. *Therefore*, he goes on, *I hated life;* for life, even at its best, means labour, and death comes and makes it wasted labour, wasted and forgotten: *Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.* All is vanity and vexation of spirit. Is our sad Preacher the last to quail before the stern reality of death? You may remember how our own Poet says to the jocund Skylark,—

> 'Waking or asleep,
> Thou of death must deem
> Things more true and deep
> Than we mortals dream;
> Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?'

And we recognise the same voice of sadness, 'deep calling unto deep' across the ages.

Let us pass on. The verses which follow, from the eighteenth to the twenty-third, linger round the same sad theme, in language coloured by the circumstances of his age and country. Death comes, and not only all the wisdom of

[1] An address of Mr. Matthew Arnold at Toynbee Hall.

the dead sage goes out, like an extinguished torch, and is forgotten; but all the other results of his eager toil are lost to him, and pass he knows not whither. Toilsome days, anxious nights, no real enjoyment even in life, and then death comes and blots out all. And then another, he knows not who, some careless unknown stranger, it may be, who has neither toiled nor spun, enters into the harvest of all his labours.

'The hard heir strides about his lands,' and he sleeps below. *His sons come to honour, and he knoweth it not; and they are brought low, but he perceiveth it not of them*[1].

Shall we listen to his gloomy thoughts, as, brooding over them, he thinks aloud once more? *Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun.* THIS IS ALSO VANITY. *Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night.* THIS IS ALSO VANITY.

I cannot join with those who read in these moody verses the language of a Solomon distrusting the character of the Rehoboam who was to succeed him, and to throw away the result of the achievements of David and of his father's wisdom. For myself, the very general form in which the thought is clothed, and much that immediately follows, seem to me to point rather to the hard experience of the

[1] Job xiv. 21.

uncertain transmission of wealth under Eastern misgovernment. But it will interest you to indicate a common interpretation, which may commend itself to some among us.

Let us return for a moment to what has gone before. It is important that we should enter fully into his thoughts.

The writer has compared wisdom and folly. He has recognised the intrinsic excellence of the one, the worthlessness and deformity of the other.

But side by side with this he has before him the terrible, and, as he states the case, the insoluble problem of death.

What matters to us, he seems to say, the difference? We die as the flowers of the forest—as the beasts of the field, he will soon add—wise and foolish alike, we die. And this power of attaining some measure of wisdom, this prerogative of self-imposed toil, in what are we the better for it? We die, and its results, so far as they are internal, die with us. So far as they are external, they pass to others, perhaps to those unworthy of them. *Man walketh in a vain shadow and disquieteth himself in vain. He heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them*[1]. So far the Psalmist is with him; but the Psalmist can add, as we Christians are taught to remember when we lay our brothers in the dust, *And now, Lord, what is my hope? Truly my hope is even in Thee.* But of this clinging to, this trusting in, yearning towards, a God far off, yet near, we have found no trace. Thus far, at least, there is not a touch of any hope beyond the veil of death.

> 'No breath of answering whisper steals
> From the shore that hath no shore beyond it.'

What shall we find? Something there must surely be to break this intolerable spell of dreariness and gloom. Yes, it meets us quite suddenly, when and where we least look for it; and here we have its very first appearance: *There is nothing better for a man*, he breaks forth, in verse 24, *than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul*

[1] Ps. xxxix. 7, 8.

enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.

This, at least, he tells us, is God's gift, the enjoyment of the present, the immediate entering into the fruit of our labour. Do not therefore shrink from it; for who, he adds, in words obscure even to darkness, *can eat, or who else hasten to it more than I?* (verse 25). Who, he may mean, has a greater and more immediate claim to the fruit of my toil than I, the toiler? For, and now, in verse 26, he strikes, or seems to strike, a very different note, startling us once more by the sudden change. *For God giveth to a man*, he says, *that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give him that is good before God.* What is this? You see how abrupt the change! Does God really give to the good man, not wisdom only, but also knowledge, and not that only, but joy and happiness? And is it only the bad man, the sinner, who has the weary toil of amassing wealth, which passes in due time to the good? If so, the world is no longer a weary waste, but a very Utopia; and the speaker, if this is his conviction, has risen from the moral and religious ruins that surrounded him just now, to the perception of an all-pervading righteous rule even in this life. Our Hamlet no longer finds the world out of joint.

Dare we say that so bright a light has suddenly illuminated the darkness of which he has been speaking, the darkness of which he is yet to speak in still sadder accents?

If so, he seems to mount too soon and too high. What follows in the same breath, in the same verse? It is the last verse with which I shall tax your attention to-day: THIS ALSO IS VANITY AND VEXATION OF SPIRIT. But how so? Has he found strength and comfort in the conviction that goodness brings, even in this life, wisdom, knowledge, joy?—so he seems to say—and that the prosperity of the wicked is only illusory, and short-lived? Is his language merely that of Psalmist

after Psalmist, who comforts himself with the thought that the well-doing of the unrighteous is but temporary, that even on this side the grave a sure retribution waits on evil? *That they, the evildoers, are set in slippery places and fall suddenly*[1]. Does he believe that happiness and misery, even here on earth, are meted out in strict proportion to the merits of mankind? If so, why this sad refrain, *This also is vanity and vexation of spirit?* What! this—a world where perfect justice rules, where goodness always triumphs, and evil is always punished! You can recall, perhaps, that touching Psalm, just quoted, where, weary with the same problem of the strange 'prosperity of the wicked,' the Psalmist goes *into the sanctuary of the Lord*, and finds some answer to a question before which *his feet were almost gone, his steps had well-nigh slipped.* And we know the words with which he hails some partial—a very partial—reply to his sad perplexity: *Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.* But if he who speaks so sadly throughout these verses really holds, what he seems for a moment to hold, that human life, when surveyed in its length and breadth, teaches us not only that goodness in God's sight brings, in the highest sense, wisdom, knowledge, and joy in its train, but also a very different lesson—that all the toil of the wicked goes to swell the earthly prosperity of the good—if this is so, we feel that he has taxed our sympathies for his despairing mood in vain. We can enter for a while into real dejection or into poetic pain;

'Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.'

But if our poet, if poet he be, has found so simple a solution for God's 'mysterious ways,' for all the inexplicable wounds and sorrows of human life, then this dreary repetition of the most dreary of phrases becomes a phrase and nothing

[1] Ps. lxxiii. 17.

more—a literary artifice, not a groan wrung from an aching heart. Its repetition henceforth will be as the peevish cry of an angry fancy. The book should have ended here, for the cloud is past, and the sun is in the sky. We should look to hear the singing of the birds, and see earth thick with flowers. Or is it that he states so cheering, yet so inadequate, and, let me add, so unreal a source of comfort, only to put it by? Does he feel that such a maxim, 'God gives the good man all that is good, the sinner all that is evil,' dear as it was to his fathers, brings him no balm? Does he repeat it musingly, half ironically, as it were; and then add, this also is tried in the balance and found wanting—all *is vanity and vexation of spirit?*

Or is it, rather, that he looks for a moment on his Maker as a God of power, unlimited power and resistless will? Is it that he finds, or tries to find, in that mere power, that mere will, the solvent of all questions, all problems? If so, he who, in the twenty-sixth verse, is 'good before God' is just the favoured mortal, and 'the sinner,' he who is not favoured; and he thus divides the world into two classes, the Elect and the Reprobate. And the Elect mean with him, not those who respond to all the hidden movements and pleadings of the Spirit of Truth and Goodness, but the happy, the fortunate in being elect. And by 'the Reprobate'—'the sinner' is his word—he means, not those who resist all workings for good, but those who, though successful for a time, in the end fall into misery and ruin, because they are born under their Maker's frown.

We can understand the attraction which such a view might have, in all ages, to minds that, looking out on the suffering and miseries of life, dwell only on the power of a Divine Ruler, and lose sight of His goodness and His love. Do any here remember the terrible lines in which Homer makes the Lord of Heaven, dwelling himself secure, fling out at random the irrevocable lots of life-long happiness or

misery to men below[1]? At all events, we remember how Job's heart was tortured by the thought that all his afflictions meant one thing, and one only, the displeasure, the unmerited displeasure, of an all-powerful God.

If this is our Preacher's meaning in the closing verse of this chapter, it is no wonder that he feels that he has here one more item in the hollowness and emptiness of life, something that deepens its sadness, intensifies its blackness. *This also*, he may well add, *is vanity and vexation of spirit.*

Shall I now detain you too long if I ask you, before we part, to pause a moment to feel sure that you have grasped firmly some of the distinct threads of thought or feeling which we have, even so far, found running through the texture of the book?

First, there is the worthlessness of human life. Millions live out in turn their brief hour; die, and are forgotten. It is an old, time-worn, theme; it has been dwelt on by poets, and others than poets, from the dawn of reflective speech to the hour at which we meet to-day: it is not only the shortness of life, the successive generations falling away, as Homer said, like the leaves in autumn; but it is its nothingness and insignificance. The sun, the earth, the streams endure; man passes and leaves no trace. The romance of Jewish history, which can still touch the imagination of the English child, has ceased to fire the heart of this world-weary Hebrew. He does not care to look back on the eventful past. Still less does he hear the footsteps of the coming Messiah in the unseen future. Of the fierce fanaticism that was one day to possess his race he has not a spark. There are those who tell us that this green earth beneath us will one day grow cold and still; the pulse of life die out; a dead world revolve, in obedience to a law that will survive it, round a fading sun. But to him who speaks to us thus far the world is already dead. Of the

[1] Iliad, xxiv. 524–553.

faith that whispers that there is a moral and a spiritual life, which is moving on to higher aims in this long series of what seem to him the dull revolving cycles of nature and of history—a life which is more real and more enduring than the abiding earth, and the ceaseless river, and the unexhausted sea—that all past changes have been heralds of future progress—that man has a destiny and a nature other than that of the brooks and springs, he has, or indicates at present, no sense, no mastery. *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*

And again, though he sees, and feels, and says, that somehow wisdom and knowledge are better—far better—than ignorance and folly, yet, in the dark mood of these opening chapters the possession of these priceless jewels brings no comfort. Take wings, he seems to say, and reach with toil and effort the utmost bounds of human thought; it will not add—trust my sad experience—a grain to life's happiness or meaning. It will only make its burden heavier; *for in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.*

Or try enjoyment. 'Build for thy soul a lordly pleasure-house.' Ransack the world for some passing alleviation to the bitter sense of life's hollowness. It will profit nothing. This too is vanity. *I said of laughter it is mad, and of mirth what profiteth it?* What then? fall back on the sense that, after all, wisdom is in itself better than folly? comfort thyself with this, and care not for the rest. Hold this 'and walk with inward glory crowned.' Alas! there sits waiting on thy path 'the shadow feared of man.' Death comes, and you and the poor, ignorant, and foolish son of a common race lie down together; and all your wisdom and your high thoughts die with you, and will be clean forgotten; and all your prudent toil and self-denial, your laborious days and unrestful nights, will have provided what will pass into heedless hands while you, the toiler, are mouldering in the grave. *Therefore,* he

says, *I hated life, for all that is wrought beneath the sun is grievous unto me.*

Life then, he seems to whisper, is itself an evil. He will say this more clearly soon. But he has said enough, already, to show that if we call the writer a preacher, he comes to us with no gospel of joy on his lips. His book is written thus far within and without with lamentation, and mourning, and woe. He can only teach us the need, the sore need, of words of comfort, of some 'tidings of great joy' to himself, to us, and all mankind.

Thus far, then, we have only the voice of those who in all time, not least in our own, have said that life is no blessing; have answered the question, 'were it not better not to be?' in an affirmative.

But we have also, let us note it well, the first appearance, the first dawn, of another train of thought that will form a marked feature in all that lies before us. Life being in itself so sad, that voice will say, do not strain thyself to solve these questions. Do not beat against thy prison bars. *Eat and drink;* enjoy, i. e. the labour of thy hands. Even this is a gift from God. Do not scorn it, but hold it fast. All gifts, he adds, in a verse on whose obscurity I have already touched, come from him; thou hast a right to them.

Weariness, despondency, a sense of the vain conflict between man's aspirations for something enduring, and the terrible reality of death; a call to accept what temporary alleviations the passing moment brings; these are so far our preacher's topics. They end with a reference of all things to the will of a God from whom, in one way or another, comes, he feels, what little good man can enjoy. Call him a pessimist, call him a fatalist, call him what you will, he is certainly, it has been justly said, no Atheist; even in his darkest mood he is full of the sense 'that there is a God above him.'

The cloud that hides the face of that God from him will grow darker still. His soul will be shadowed by an intenser

night. But the sense that there is a God behind and above the cloud will never fail him. Ah! we can but say, that to that weary soul there could have come some glimpse of Him whom prophets and kings desired to see, some gracious revelation of a Father's love; that he could have laid his hand on the very hem of the garment of Him whose coming in the flesh we soon shall celebrate.

[DECEMBER 6, 1884.]

LECTURE VI.

Chapter III.

It is possible that some among those whom I am addressing may have set themselves at one time or another in their lives, perhaps quite recently, to read through the Book of Ecclesiastes. In spite of occasional obscurities, they have, doubtless, been able to recognise some continuity of thought, some approach to method, in the first two chapters. But as they enter on the third, all seems changed. It is not only that the personality, real or assumed, of King Solomon as the speaker, is entirely dropped: it is not merely that everything approaching the form of personal reminiscences, or autobiographical confessions, is henceforth absent; they pass at once into an entirely different atmosphere alike of thought and of style. They find themselves suddenly confronted, from the very first verse, with a series of epigrammatic aphorisms, reminding them of the central portion of the Book of Proverbs. Here, as there, each of these aphorisms is thrown into the form of a couplet or distich, a verse containing two lines, one answering to another with that *parallelism*, or correspondence, that rhyme, as it were, not of sound but of sense, in which Hebrew poetry so largely consists. In this chapter we shall find that each of these 'proverbs' will begin with the same word, and will enforce one and the same lesson. It is a lesson which is common alike to the experience of Hebrew, Greek, and Englishman; taught alike by the Greek sage and by our own Shakespeare. It tells us that *to everything there is a season, a time;* that there is a right moment *to every purpose under heaven.*

The truth is conveyed, first of all, in the opening verse, and

is repeated under various forms, covering the manifold occupations and interests of human life, through eight verses.

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to get, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to cast away;
A time to rend, and a time to sew;
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate;
A time of war, and a time of peace.

Now the meaning of these verses, taken separately, is clear enough; but as we read them through we naturally ask, what place do these repeated adages and maxims—these common truisms we might even add—hold in the course of the writer's thoughts? If all is vanity, if all things are proved to be hollow, why waste his breath in telling us, with a somewhat tedious iteration, that just as birth and death, and war and peace, come at their allotted time in the life of the individual or of the nation, so there is a fit time for every act, however voluntary, and for every emotion, however natural?

It would be easy to imitate the great majority of older commentators, and to dismiss the really important question of the general bearing of this string of aphorisms, placed side by side with an Oriental prolixity, and to divert your attention by affixing all kinds of mystical, historical, and theological senses to each of the separate combinations of words and

images in which the same lesson is successively enforced. But I will not try to find, with Christian commentators, an allusion to the doctrine of Justification by Faith or Works, in 'gathering and casting away stones;' or, with Rabbinical writers, to the duty of putting to death by stoning disobedient children, or to the wisdom of throwing overboard a cargo in a storm. But I will ask, why do we meet this fragment of the Book of Proverbs in a place that seems of all others so unsuited to its introduction; breaking up, as it does, the natural progress of the writer's thoughts, as a Greek chorus suspends, for other reasons, the action of a Greek tragedy? In answering this question, we must not forget how familiar these two-fold sententious maxims, in which one man's insight gathers up the experience of many, were to the Jewish mind; or how natural their use would be to one who wrote in the school, so to speak, of the royal and traditional master of Proverbs, King Solomon; or again, how dear they are at this moment to the kindred Arab races. I may remind you also how often our Lord Himself mingled them with His teaching:—

Give not that which is holy unto dogs[1],
Neither cast ye your pearls before swine.

Again:

He that is not with Me is against Me[2],
He that gathereth not with Me scattereth abroad.

And secondly, as to the more important question, their meaning here. Is it not this? 'There is a law and order in all things,' they seem to say: 'a fitness and unfitness, could we but see it. Life, death, destruction, production, growth, decay, sorrow, joy, loss, gain, come at fixed times. We cannot alter these times any more than we can call up winter's snows in the midst of summer.' It seems a feeling akin to that which we call Fatalism; or rather, as that implies some power called Fate, apart from God, of a pre-

[1] St. Matthew vii. 6. [2] St. Matthew xii. 30.

determined, necessary course of things, so ordained by the Lord of human history as to leave no scope for human freedom. All things are ordered, fixed, settled, timed and dated, as it were, beforehand. Even as in the first chapter he had said that each group of events is repeated in regular cycle; that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, new beneath the sun; so here, he adds, the revolution proceeds with undeviating, clockwork, steady regularity.

Among Western nations, and here in England, it is quite true that, whatever may be men's theories as to the freedom or absence of freedom of the human will, they act themselves and treat others as free agents. Men may, as did Milton's fallen angels, sit apart 'on a hill retired'—

> 'And reason high
> Of Providence, foreknowledge, will, and Fate,
> Fixed fate, freewill, foreknowledge absolute,
> And find no end, in wandering mazes lost[1].'

But when they come down from that 'hill retired,' to mix with the crowds of living, erring, striving, suffering men in the world below, they leave their theories and their speculations behind them. Our writer, however, is not speaking here of the abstract freedom of the human will, but rather of the value or worthlessness of human action. To his saddened eye the law of order and recurrence which he sees is pressed at once to its mournful and logical conclusion. He sees no room for the development of human character in contact with these fixed phenomena and these iron laws of life; and thus he ends his string of proverbial couplets by asking, in verse 9, not for the first time, the despairing question, *What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?* What gain has the toiler, imprisoned within these remorseless laws, from all his toil? It is not, remember, the higher warning yet to come from lips divine, the lesson against over-toil, over-anxiety, drawn from the bright lilies that clothed the fields of Palestine

[1] 'Paradise Lost,' Bk. ii. 559.

with a splendour beyond that of Solomon in all his glory. He is not leading up to words of tenderness such as, *Your heavenly Father careth for you.* It is just the dark thought that toil is vain, for man is in face of forces which he cannot read, or mould, or bend. And then, in the tenth verse, he speaks again in his own person: 'I,' he says, 'even I, have looked with anxious eyes into the various forms of an activity which, profitless as it is, God has assigned to the sons of men.' *I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.* It is a pathetic touch, this careful survey of mankind all busied in that which cannot profit; and the words which follow, could we only be certain that we grasped firm their true meaning, are full of a mournful, but suggestive poetry. He has made, he says in the eleventh verse, all things around man fair. *He hath made everything beautiful in his time:* in *its* place and season. For a moment the sense of the beauty of created things, of which there seemed no perception in the opening chapter, seems to cross his soul. We shall find a trace of it again. The world, he says, in which He has placed man, is no wild waste, but of exceeding beauty. Do our thoughts go back for a moment from these darkened skies to some distant scene—to bright skies, or snowy mountains, or heathery moorland, or green pastures, or sparkling sea? Then, he adds, not, we have reason to believe, as our translation runs, *he has set the world*[1], but, 'he has set *eternity*, a sense of the infinite, in man's heart; yet so that he cannot read, cannot understand, the work that God doeth from the beginning to the end.' Let me read the verse: *also he hath set eternity*, or the infinite, *in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh* (*doeth*) *from the beginning to the end.*

What does he say? Is it this? He has framed man to lead a life of labour and activity; encaged him in a world of

[1] The Revised Version retains 'the world' in the text, but gives 'eternity' in the margin.

order and of beauty. Within him is a sense of the endless, the infinite, the absolute, that yearns out to this Order and this Beauty. Yet he cannot satisfy this sense, he cannot read God's works. It is a thought, a feeling, common to our race;

> 'those obstinate questionings
> Of sense and outward things,
> Fallings from us, vanishings;'

that

> 'Vague emotion of delight
> In gazing up an Alpine height,'

that

> 'Yearning to the lamps of night.'

God has set before man the desire to read the 'riddle of the painful earth,' but has withheld the key.

> 'The end and the beginning vex
> His spirit, many things perplex.'

It is a sigh that has been heaved, not only in the days whether of Solomon or of one who used his name, but wherever the human soul has tried to pierce the darkness that environs it.

But if, as seems most probable, this is the Preacher's thought, he comes back at once to the one single lesson of practice which he has yet drawn. Man's toil may, or may not, be vain; that depends on laws and sequences which he cannot master, which he did not frame. Man's eye will never read the mysteries that surround him. Let him therefore cease to repine and—he gives the advice for the second time—recognise the one good thing within his reach. There is one thing good, viz. *to rejoice*, be cheerful, *and to do good* (the phrase, I fear, answers to our *well-doing* in its sense of *happiness*) *in his life*, while his brief day lasts. Let him eat and drink, and enjoy the fruit of his labour. It is the gift of God (vv. 12, 13).

I need scarcely tell you that those who are not content to take the speaker's words as they find them, use them here as a vehicle for thoughts absolutely at variance with their plain meaning. 'Rejoicing' means, 'rejoicing in

the study of the Law,' says the pious Rabbi. 'Eating and drinking' must surely mean 'the partaking of the blessed Sacrament,' says the Christian Father. But to him who would ask, first of all, what is the real thought set before us on the open page, there is no evading the fact that, so far as the Preacher has yet advanced, he finds no better solace for poor mankind,—*miseris mortalibus*, as Virgil, echoing the words of Homer, described our race,—than simple and thankful enjoyment of the fruits of toil. It is the gentler and sweeter side of the adage from whose degrading form St. Paul, in presence of the Cross and Resurrection of his Lord, shrank with such horror. 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die[1].' *I know*, says our Preacher in verses 12 and 13, *that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God.* So run his words. We feel at once that there may possibly have been times and seasons when such advice was the best that could be found. 'There is,' he has told us just now, 'a time for all things'—

A time to plant, a time to pluck up;
A time to break down, and a time to build up.

May we not say, in very sacred words, that 'unless such times had been shortened' man's spiritual nature must have been in danger of mournful shipwreck?

But we return to the passage. 'Let man,' he says, 'enjoy God's gift. It is the gift of One whose will is resistless, whose laws are unchangeable.' And he goes on in verse 14, *I know that whatsoever God doeth it shall be for ever; nothing can be put to it* (nothing added), *nor anything taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before Him.* He displays His power to make men bend before it. It is not, you will observe, God's undeviating righteousness, still less His love, but His power, that is here put forward; it is not man's

[1] 1 Cor. xv. 32.

sinfulness, but his powerlessness, that is the lesson dwelt on. And once more, in verse 15, he dwells on the unvarying, unchangeable order that marshals the course of the world's history,

That which hath been is now ;
And that which is to be hath already been.

'There is nothing new,' he has already said, 'under the sun.' *And God*, he goes on, *requireth*—or, rather, recalls, bringeth back in due time—*that which is past*, that which has fled on the wings of time. The old drama is played out, in the old way, by other actors.

The lesson to cheerfulness under such bidding seems a hard one. Men have recited it over the wine-cup in old times and new, in East and West. But the human heart, with such shadows gathering in the background, has recognised its hollowness, and again and again has put back the anodyne from its lips. Let us, too, pass it by, even as our Preacher does.

For we have now to penetrate more deeply into the sources of his unabated sadness. We shall see other phantoms, more grisly than those which were born within his own bosom, rise up to mar the joy which he commends.

And moreover, he says, in verse 16, and with these two simple conjunctions he passes into another and a different gallery of the dark pictures of life through which he leads us. He is no longer gazing sadly on an unchanging earth, and a weary round of suns, and winds, and waters, and a spreading expanse of human graves. He is no longer experimentalizing, so to speak, on his own soul; 'roaming with a hungry heart' through the realms of knowledge or of pleasure. Nor, again, is he contemplating any longer that series of unchanging laws, the sense of which chills and paralyses him. He simply looks out on the ordinary course of daily life, and sees an ill-ordered world, 'a world,' to use the words of an honoured leader of modern science, 'full not of pain only, but of injustice, in which the weakest goes to the wall.

And moreover, he says, in verse 16, *And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there.* We Englishmen can hardly enter into the full bitterness of his words. We may question, we may criticise, we may blame from time to time, this or that magisterial or judicial decision; but we have a profound belief that the administration of justice in our own land, and in its dependencies, is, and has long been, pure and impartial. We can hardly realize the general demoralisation, the poison introduced into the very arteries and veins of the social system, when once such administration becomes thoroughly corrupt. Still less can we realize the misery that results, when not corruption only, but corruption and tyranny, take their places on the seat of justice; when that earthly Law which confronts men in their daily life is no longer the reflection of that of which our own Hooker says, that 'its seat is in the bosom of God, and its voice the harmony of the universe,' but is the embodiment of all wickedness and all injustice. May we guard with righteous jealousy the heritage into which we have entered! May we carry the blessings of pure justice and fair dealing wherever our flag flies or our language is spoken. May our children pass it on unimpaired to their children's children. But you hardly need to be reminded that millions of human beings still live under a rule to which the simple words that I have just read,

I saw under the sun the place of judgment that wickedness was there,

And the place of righteousness that iniquity was there,

are still fully applicable. And we know how deep was the yearning for righteousness on the seat of justice in the heart of the Jewish nation; how often it finds a voice in Psalmist and in Prophet. You remember how, in the noble picture of the ideal King in the 72nd Psalm, we have the emphatic words, recurring again and again, that paint the attribute of Justice on the bench, *He shall judge thy people*

with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment. He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor. For he shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper. It is a Psalm of which, as you will see by the heading in your Bibles, tradition spoke as David's prayer for Solomon. And you know how the Prophet, in the Evening Lesson for the Second Sunday in Advent, read here so lately, speaks of one who

Shall not judge after the sight of his eyes,
Neither reprove after the hearing of his ears,
But with righteousness shall he judge the poor,
And reprove with equity for the meek of the earth[1].

Such texts give a livelier meaning to such words as *shall the Judge of all the earth do wrong?* Shall God imitate this corrupt herd of judges? And they even lend a force to our Lord's parable of the Unjust Judge, as drawn, like all His other teaching, from the familiar experience of daily life. I have heard it said, since I last spoke here, by one who has a rare knowledge of Oriental life, that if one known to be incorruptible and all-powerful were to mount his horse in the streets of Constantinople, and make his way through realm after realm under Eastern governments, his course would be lined from first to last with suppliants for mere justice; his ears deafened with the cry of that poor woman in the parable, 'give me justice against my adversary.'

I have spoken at this length on the subject in order that we may clearly realize the effect on the mind of him whose words we are considering, of the spectacle, the bewildering and baffling spectacle, on which he looked; an Eastern state, where unrighteousness and corruption were in full possession of unlimited power. Let me read the words in which he will emphasise in the next chapter what he has seen, *So I returned,* he will say, *and considered all the oppressions*

[1] Isaiah xi. 3, 4.

that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter[1]. What a picture of human society! Yet it is a sight such as under many an Eastern government might still be seen. The words would find an echo from thousands of some race, ruled—shall we say?—by a Mahommedan conqueror, possibly from some nominally Christian land, where the mind of the ruling class is sapped by corruption, and demoralized by suspicion and personal fear. Could such words, let me ask once more, have come from the lips of a Solomon; of a king whose reign was proverbial for the prosperity of his well-ordered empire; whose one sigh in his youth had been 'to judge rightly this thy great people[2];' whose early fame rested on his righteous judgments? Can we believe that, as in his grey hairs he looked out from his palace, or travelled from town to town, he saw, and sadly acquiesced in, one dead level of cruel and unrighteous administration, of the prostitution of that justice which was so dear to his own youth and to the instincts of his nation? Are we to believe that into the glowing picture given of his reign by the sacred historian we must interpolate the words, *From Dan even unto Beersheba there was injustice on the seat of justice, and the poor were oppressed, and there was no helper?* If so, well might we, in the name of human nature, echo the cry of the Northern tribes, 'To your tents, O Israel! now see to thine own house, David[3].'

Let me return to the words before us. He whose moody thoughts we are following looked out on this depressing sight of misrule and misery. There rose, he tells us, within him a gleam of hope.

I said in mine heart, he says in verse 17, *God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.* It is the first glimpse that we have seen of such a hope among the dark thoughts that cross

[1] iv. 1. [2] 1 Kings iii. 9. [3] 1 Kings xii. 16.

him. *There*, before God's throne—there, not here—every purpose, every thought, and every deed shall have its *time*, its hour, i. e. of trial and retribution. But the hope eludes his grasp; and there comes in its place another and a sadder voice. *I said*, he goes on immediately, *I said in mine heart concerning the estate*, the high estate, *of the sons of men*, that it was just this, *that God might manifest them*, show them what they really were, *and that they might see that they themselves are beasts*. It is, he says, man's sad prerogative to be conscious of his doom. And then, in line after line, he dwells upon and enforces the gloomy and despairing verdict of his heart, that man and beast share the same being, draw the same breath, are animated by the same life, spring from the same source, go back to the same elements. *For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other: yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast:* FOR ALL IS VANITY. *All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again* (vv. 19, 20). 'All is vanity.' And then, as though in answer to some faint suggestion of a larger hope, *Who knoweth*, he says very sadly in verse 21, *whether*—so the best authorities, so all the ancient versions[1]—*Who knoweth whether the spirit of man goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast goeth downward to the earth?* In all that we see their end is the same; all go unto one place—the grave; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Of the rest we know nothing; our hopes are based upon an idle fancy.

He seems to have touched the very nadir of misery and despair. Yet even darker thoughts are in store. 'What hope of shelter or redress?' He turns once more from these sights of injustice, from these baffled hopes, from this ache and pain within. For the third time he preaches the lesson of cheerful enjoyment of the fruit of man's labour. Since such a cloud, he says, hangs over the future, take that portion

[1] So also the Revised Version.

which God has allotted thee. It is thy portion; mourn and wail no longer, but enjoy it cheerfully. *Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better* (so ends the chapter) *than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that,* not the future, *is his portion; for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?*

As we listen to his words, and enter into the deep dejection out of which they spring, we feel a certain touch—slight it may be, yet a touch—of a somewhat higher teaching than we at first recognised. We need not do violence to phrase after phrase, and force into words of despair and negation thoughts of hope and affirmation. But we feel that we are in the presence of one who has the germ given him of some courage, equanimity, and calmness, which may grow into other and better things. His spirit is torn by, suffers with, all the pangs that beset the enquiring human heart. He feels for all the woes of humanity; cannot put them by and fly to the wine-cup and crown himself with garlands. He has hated life; yet he will not lose his courage. 'Be of good cheer,' he says even in his dark hour; 'work on, and enjoy the fruits of work; it is thy portion. Do not curse God and die.'

There is a certain dignity in words that seemed at first sight almost frivolous, a mere trifling with life's sorrows. We shall see what trials are yet in store for him. We see at least that he is not merely, or wholly, a cold-blooded, calculating, epicurean, turning his eyes from life's trials, but one who, as typifying and embodying the sad perplexities of so many of his fellow human workers, might well win the pity of the 'Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief;' Whose heart yearned over the sorrowful; Who had words of eternal life for those who said, 'Lord, to whom shall we go?'; Who bore with all the infirmities of poor human nature, and Who scarcely uttered a word of severity or sternness, except to rebuke falsehood and to unmask hypocrisy.

[December 13, 1884.]

LECTURE VII.

Chapters IV, V.

We paused, when we met last, at the point where our Preacher, after a steady outlook on the seeming misrule of the world around him, had tried to comfort himself under the dark thoughts which the sight suggested. He turned for refuge to the sense of a day of ultimate redress and retribution, when the righteous and the wicked should alike answer for all their thoughts and all their acts before the tribunal of a God of righteousness.

But the solace was, as we saw, short-lived. It was succeeded by a gloomy train of blank misgivings. We may find their parallel in the confessions of ancient and modern doubters; but we may well be startled at finding them, urged with such terrible and relentless force, in the pages of the Old Testament.

Can it be, he says, that it is God's purpose that man should excel the lower creation just in this, that he should feel the bitterness of his doom? That he should suffer, or see suffering, endure wrong, or see it triumphant around him; be conscious, in a way denied to the beast or the bird, of the moral disorder and imperfections of life, and be taught at the same time that this world, so strangely out of joint, is his only stage, the one sphere in which his lot is cast? It seems at least, he says, that save this sad pre-eminence, man is on a level with all lower forms of life. None, at all events, knows, none can assure him, that death is not the 'be all and the end all' of his short existence.

'Ah, well!' he adds, 'if so, let him meet his fate with calmness, or more, with cheerfulness. Since none can show

him what lies beyond, let him take what comfort is attainable in the immediate result of the labour of his hands or brain, and ask no more.' If you read the four verses—the eighteenth to the twenty-first of chapter iii—you will see that I have in no way overstated his meaning, but have given you a fair summary of the conclusions that he has so far reached.

It is not the last time, my friends, that the world has been told that the higher the organization, the greater the feeling of a want of correspondence between itself and that which environs it; that as man emerges from the mere hard struggle for subsistence, questions will inevitably come to him which he cannot answer; that he will feel himself in the presence of contradictions which he cannot reconcile; and that he will find at last that mere consciousness involves frustration and suffering, till he comes to pronounce existence itself to be an evil. The only remedy, he has been told, if remedy there is, lies in facing the fact that he is disinherited of his supposed hopes, and in making the most of such poor palliatives as life can offer. Let him work, others will tell him, and rejoice in his works—fill up life—shall we say?—with politics, literature, art, and commerce, with ambition or science, with friendship or love. The world will be a good world still. Above all, let him turn his eyes from the other world. *For who can bring him to see what shall be after him?* How often may you have heard, or read, such counsel in your own day?

But hardly has the thinker—who takes his place in this great record of God's dealings with the human soul, in virtue of showing to us a stage in the spiritual history of our race—a type of other souls as sad as he—hardly has he, for the third time, put before himself and others this form of comfort than he finds the staff glide, as it were, from his hands. He sinks down into a lower level, from which even the poor strip of sky which he saw just now becomes dark and clouded. *I turned again*, he says,—and then comes the despairing sen-

tence with which the fourth chapter opens and which I read by anticipation a week ago. *So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.*

'How can a man rejoice, even if untouched himself, he seems to say, who sees such sights?' It is not merely the denial, the perversion, of justice, but the broad surface of the earth—all beneath the sun—seems to him one scene of cruelty and oppression. From wide plains, and crowded cities, go up to heaven,

'A lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong.'

Can this bitter experience be drawn, I asked in passing, from the golden days of Solomon, from the high noon of Hebrew prosperity, as sketched in the Book of Kings? He who utters them sees nothing but violence and cruelty on the one hand, the tears of the oppressed on the other; a system, firmly established and deeply rooted all round him, of unrighteous force and arbitrary rule. And the words have a strange pathos in their very calmness, as we notice the twice repeated phrase; 'and they had no comforter.' So ruthless, so remorseless, the oppressor's sway, that none dare even show commiseration to the victims of his tyranny. Those very proofs of the sympathy which Hebrew felt and feels for Hebrew, which are so marked a feature in that historic race even here and now; which ages ago drew 'much people' to follow the bier of the widow's only son outside the gates of Nain, or the throng of friends to the house of the sisters at Bethany 'to comfort them concerning their brother,' even these were denied.

Is this, we may well ask, the picture, drawn by himself, of the rule of a native prince, ruling over an Israel, 'eating and drinking and making merry' in the new-found sense of prosperity, riches, and empire?

And what is the effect, let us now ask, of such a sight upon the mind of this son of Abraham? No plaintive cry to the God of Abraham and Isaac, or to the Jehovah of Mount Sinai, such as bursts so often from the lips of Psalmist and of Prophet, no appeal to the glories of the past, or to the hopes of the future? Do we hear the cry *Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath He in anger shut up His tender mercies? Is His mercy clean gone for ever? Doth His promise come utterly to an end, for evermore*[1]?

No! he has not the strength, so to speak, not the spiritual vitality left for this. Such passion, such faith we may even say, is dead within him. He draws from it only a sadder lesson still. The dead, he concludes, are happier than the living; ''tis better not to be:' happier those who have never seen the light; to see the light is but 'to see all the evil that is wrought beneath the sun.' The mere sight of the disorder, misrule, and suffering of this weary world makes life intolerable. Listen to him in the verses that follow.

Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive.

Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, he who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun (vv. 2, 3).

Those who have taken sufficient interest in the subject to follow at all closely in their Bibles what has been thus far said, will see, I am sure, that I am giving them a fair statement, not of what we should expect, or wish, to find in the teaching of one whom we have been accustomed to call 'the Preacher,' or 'the Wise man' of the Old Testament; but of what we Christians, at this Christmas season, actually have before us in these musings of a Hebrew soul, unshaken in its belief in a Divine Ruler of the universe, but sadly facing the terrible problems of a time of darkness, and yearning vainly for a light not yet come into the world.

[1] Ps. lxxvii. 9, 8.

And now we shall see him, after this groan of despair, turn aside from these haunting and irrepressible phantoms of the soul. He can bear them no longer; he puts them aside for a little while. His mood is still bitter; but it is no longer on the oppressions and cruelty of life that he fixes his eye, but on its littleness, its mutual jealousies, its greed, its strange reverses, its shams and hollowness.

The Preacher puts on the garb of the Satirist, and lashes the pettiness, and the follies, and the vain hurry of mankind. He tells us first, how, when good work is done, envy and detraction at once show their poisoned fangs. *Again*, he tells us in verse 4, *I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour.* Even 'the fool,' always mentioned in Psalms and Proverbs with a fierce contempt that explains our Lord's warning in the Sermon on the Mount, has in his silly *folding of the hands* more enjoyment[1] than many a restless toiler. Even men's contempt of the fool is folly. *Better*, he cries, in verse 6, *an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.* And next, he draws a picture, sketched perhaps from the experience of an age of distrust and insecurity, of the solitary friendless money-maker, of a Shylock without even a Jessica, of an Isaac of York with no faithful Rebecca. *Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun. There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail* (vv. 7, 8). And then, beneath the portrait, he writes, as it were, a series of mottoes, adage after adage, on the misery and folly of a friendless life. They begin with *Two are better than one*, in verse 9; they end with a *threefold cord is not quickly broken*

[1] I have followed Dr. Ginsburg's interpretation: *and yet eateth meat of his own.* The R. V. introduces no change.

in verse 12. And this said, he turns to remind his readers or hearers of the strange vicissitudes to which kings are liable, even despotic kings. He brings before us, in verse 13, the image of the *old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished*; debauched by long tenure of a power to which he was born, and scorning advice and warning. We see him driven from his throne, stripped of his riches, becoming in his grey hairs a beggar, and we think, perhaps of the sad end of the monarch whose youthful portrait[1] hangs here close by us, and of the exiled Bolingbroke, who took his place: *Out of prison one cometh to reign, whereas, he that is born in his kingdom, born in sovereignty, becometh poor.*

'The poor and oppressed envy,' he seems to say, 'royal state. Need they do so?'

And then he sees another step, a step this time from the dungeon to the throne. Thousands, he says, pay homage to the new darling of his people. *There is no end*, he says, *to those who crowd around him*[2]. How the picture in Shakespeare rushes to our minds[3]. Yet even this, too, ends in nothingness. The hero of his generation is soon forgotten. *They also that come after shall not rejoice in him.* All fades and passes into oblivion. The world is full of that which satisfieth not. This climbing to the heights of power and

[1] The famous painting of Richard II in his coronation robes, seated in King Edward's chair, hangs not far from the pulpit at the Abbey.

[2] *I saw all the living which walk under the sun, that they were with the youth, the second, that stood up in his stead* (v. 15). R.V.

[3] Richard II, Act V, Sc. 2.

York. Then, as I said, the duke, great Bolingbroke,
Mounted upon a hot and fiery steed
Which his aspiring rider seem'd to know,
With slow but stately pace kept on his course,
Whilst all tongues cried 'God save thee, Bolingbroke!'
You would have thought the very windows spake,
So many greedy looks of young and old
Through casements darted their desiring eyes
Upon his visage, and that all the walls
With painted imagery had said at once

popularity, *this also*, surely, this too, *is vanity and vexation of spirit* (*striving after wind*, R. V.).

And then, in the next chapter, with a suddenness that is almost startling, he turns to the realm of religion and religious duties. He conveys his meaning in the form of precepts as to what should be avoided, rather than in pictures of the hollowness of even worship and devotion. He lays down the pen of the Satirist, and resumes something of the voice of the Preacher.

Keep thy foot, he says in the opening words of chapter v. walk warily and straightly, *when thou goest to the house of God*. He speaks, you will see, to men familiar as we are with a stated and accustomed ritual, a ritual already tinged with formalism and other evils that wait upon the good and gracious gift of combined and organized worship.

The words, *Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools*[1]: *for they consider not that they do evil*, are so familiar to us that we forget the ages that have elapsed, and the historical difficulties that they suggest. We quote them, and pious Christians, whose 'house of God' is, perhaps, some English village church, write them, it may be, in the fly-leaf of their children's Prayer-books, to remind them of a lesson which they will teach till time shall be no more.

But what is the picture actually before the speaker's eye? Is it the newly-built temple of the son of David, with its central sanctuary into which none but the priest could enter;

> 'Jesu preserve thee! welcome, Bolingbroke!'
> Whilst he, from the one side to the other turning,
> Bareheaded, lower than his proud steed's neck,
> Bespake them thus: 'I thank you, countrymen:'
> And thus still doing, thus he pass'd along.
>
> *Duch.* Alack, poor Richard! where rode he the whilst?

Compare the Archbishop of York's speech in Henry IV, Pt. II, Act I, Sc. 3.

[1] *For to draw nigh to hear is better than to give the sacrifice of fools*, R. V.

its flaming altar on which the sons of Aaron consumed the victims; its spacious courts, which the pious Israelite rejoiced to tread, and whence he sent up his homage and supplications to the Jehovah of his fathers? Or is it its humble successor, reared upon ruins, amidst the tears of the aged[1], on the return from the Captivity, not yet restored and enlarged and beautified by the Idumean Herod? Or is it rather some house of God of another kind; a Jewish synagogue in some distant province, in Persian satrapy or Egyptian city, such as a race that already had begun to be denizens and settlers in all lands beneath the sun, was raising far and wide as centres of prayer, of reading the Law and Prophets, of instruction and of exhortation?

Is it the quiet and humble *hearing* of this reading and this preaching that is better than all *the sacrifice of fools?* Or does *to hear* mean *to hearken and to obey?* and have we in another form the very words of the Samuel of old time enforcing the eternal truth, *Behold*[2] *to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams?*

I bring before you these questions, not to bewilder or distract, but to open your eyes to the obscurity that always veils the background, comes sometimes to the very foremost front, of the book which we are reading; and to the very manifold and interesting problems which surround us at every step.

Whatever the accessories of his teaching, we see the truth that lies beneath them. It is an exhortation to a calm and reverent spirit, and, as he goes on, we see something like an anticipation of the teaching of One, ah! how far, how infinitely, greater than the true or the reputed Solomon who speaks. *Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few* (verse 2). 'Do not multiply words. Keep a watch on the words of thy lips

[1] Ezra iii. 12. [2] 1 Sam. xv. 22.

and on the meditations of thy heart. Thou art a child of earth, and in presence of the God of heaven.' They are the words with which Richard Hooker ends one of the most eloquent of his pages[1]. 'Let thy words be few, humble and sincere.'

For a moment our thoughts go out to the contrast between the Pharisees with their long prayers, and him who said 'Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner!' Ah! that the words which we are spelling out so slowly were as clear as those of that greater Teacher.

'Remember,' he goes on to say in verses 3 to 7, which I will put before you in a paraphrase, 'that just as the day's tide of cares and occupations confuses the sleeping brain with a whirl and eddy of disordered images, so in the fool's prayer all the thoughts and wishes of the day rush together in the form of rash and irreverent and low-pitched prayers[2]; run into an idle clatter of vows and promises, which, when the fever fit of selfish devotion is over, the careless worshipper lets slip for ever.' Do our thoughts travel to the peasant of some Southern race kneeling before his pictured saint, whom he by turns entreats and reproaches? or to a Louis XI offering his strange vows before his leaden images? or shall we come back to our own hearts? Shall we think of our own eager prayers for something that we craved? our hasty and unfulfilled vows and resolutions of amendment of life? 'Far better,' he reminds the worshippers of his day, 'far better to make no vows, whether of actual sacrifice, or of some period of abstinence, than to vow and break your vow, or come before God's angel, the unseen guardian of God's worship,—the word is thought by some to mean the human priest stationed in the Temple—with a

[1] 'He is above, and we upon earth; therefore it behoveth our words to be wary and few.' Eccl. Polity, Bk. I, Ch. 2. 2.

[2] *For a dream cometh with a multitude of business: and a fool's voice with a multitude of words,* R. V.

hollow and prevaricating plea for exemption.' 'To do so,' he adds in verse 6, 'is to brave God's anger.' 'In the many words of many worshippers there may be all the hollowness of idle dreams. *Fear thou God.*'

With these solemn words, he who has spoken by turns in the character of the sick and disillusioned searcher after knowledge and after pleasure; of the pessimistic and life-weary sigher after annihilation; of the despairing fatalist; of the sad agnostic, who sees no knowledge possible of the unknowable world beyond the grave; of the hopeless materialist, who sees in man nothing beyond his animal organization; of the more cheerful commender of such brief enjoyment as life permits; rises at last to the full stature of the Preacher, if not of filial trust and faith, yet of reverence and awe. *Fear thou God.* He holds firm at all events, though all around invites to a hopeless scepticism, to the belief in a God who, even though we are to pass away and be forgotten, yet has claims on some deeper feeling than earthly objects can inspire. It is not Christian faith, it is not the soul 'athirst for God, even the living God,' but it is something beyond the reach of those whom in many ways he so resembles, with whom he has in many points such sympathy, those who say, aloud or in their hearts, 'there is no God.'

So end the meditations of our teacher, be he who he may, of a teacher of the Old Testament, on the subject of worship. Can we do better than compare them for a moment with the words of a Divine Teacher, beginning also with a caution, but ending with the prayer of prayers, addressed to a Father in Heaven? *When thou prayest be not as the hypocrites are . . . 'Verily, I say unto you, they have their reward.' And when ye pray, use not vain repetitions* (or unmeaning cries) *as the heathen do . . . for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be ye not therefore like unto them, for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him*[1].

[1] St. Matt. vi. 5–8.

Let us, before we separate, glance at so much of the passage which follows as can convey to us any clear sense.

He passes—by perhaps no unnatural transition—from the worship of God to the government of the world; to the sad spectacle, I should rather say, of the misgovernment, the misrule, of the world.

But there is a darkness over his language; and as we read and re-read his words, two distinct voices, two opposite lessons, seem to come out of the cloud which covers them. Both will interest you; and it may interest you also to notice that the moment our Preacher speaks henceforth on what we may call the politics of his day, his language becomes almost studiedly obscure. Listen to him: *If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they* (verse 8). Are the words those of hopeless counsel of submission to the inevitable? I incline to think, to fear, that it must be so. 'If thou seest oppression everywhere, *be not overstirred;* let not thy heart move thee to outspoken indignation.' This, doubtless, is the meaning of 'marvel not.' 'It is useless. Above the oppressive satrap is a hierarchy of others. All are alike corrupt!' And is the ninth verse a sigh from the subject of such systematic tyranny for a native king who would care for the husbandman and for husbandry; for the Jewish yeoman, so tenderly cared for by Mosaic legislation? *Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field*[1]. Or can all we read be words of consolation and cheering? 'Be not distressed,' does he say? 'there are those above who will repress and punish such wrongs. Even the highest of all, the king, the Eastern king, is dependent for his prosperity on the well-doing of the soil.'

[1] *But the profit of a land every way is a king that maketh himself servant to the field*, Revised Version, margin.

It is characteristic, at all events, of the familiarity of English-speaking and Protestant races with the language of our version of Scripture, that, absolutely obscure as is the whole passage, doubtful and uncertain to the last degree as is the meaning of individual clauses, yet the little fragment from them, *the profit of the earth is for all*, formed in summer last—even as he who now speaks was puzzling over their sense, amidst his books, in a Highland village—the motto for a meeting of Northern crofters demanding a change in Scottish land laws.

I should fatigue you by attempting to guide you, line by line, through all that follows. The next eight verses are a kind of satire on the 'vanity of vanities,' for which the oppressive governor and the unrighteous judge barters his peace of mind, sells his very soul.

Yet so forcible and picturesque is his language that I cannot dismiss it without one word.

In verse 10 we read, *He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver.* In how many tongues, in how many ages, has the same trite truth been embodied in proverb, poetry, fable, and story. 'The avaricious shall never find enjoyment, vanity is written on his work.'

Again, notice verse 11: *When goods increase, they are increased that eat them.* Do we see the vast Eastern retinue as the man rises in rank and power? Shall our thoughts go out to our Indian Empire? or do we apply the adage in more homely guise to English life?

Again, as we read in verse 12, *The sleep of a labouring man is sweet whether he eat little or much*, can we avoid thinking of the soliloquy of the English king, the 'Bolingbroke,' who died hard by; of his address to 'Nature's soft nurse;' of his envy of the ship-boy rocked and lulled by the tossing of 'the rude imperious surge[1]?'

And he goes on to lash with grim satire the eager and

[1] Henry IV, Pt. II, Act III, Sc. 1.

corroding care for wealth—*the bread eaten in darkness*, all the joy of life foregone for the sake of a wealth which may pass in a moment, and leave its master and his heir in beggary, which, at all events, must go at the hour of death. Naked as he came must he go. *In all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?* And once more he comes round in verses 18, 19, 20—it is the fourth time—to the old refrain. *Behold that which I have seen;* he enforces it by dwelling on the result of his own experience, *it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion. Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour: this is the gift of God.* He ends with words less clear than we could wish: *For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart.* Do the last words mean 'he will lose in enjoyment the sad sense of the shortness of life?' He will forget the doom of death in the joy, the short-lived joy which God gives him? It may be so; but they are confessedly obscure.

We have gone to-day through some very mingled and even perplexing utterances. It has been a tangled skein that I have not professed wholly to unravel; gloom, despair, cheerfulness, satire, the teaching of history, wise counsels of reverence and devotion; again, a sad recognition of the evils of the age, of the insecurity of wealth, the uselessness of toil; all these, and more than these, have come in turn before us, and still from time to time words of wisdom; and yet we have ended where we were, merely with the repeated call to passing enjoyment. Our Preacher, if such we may call him, does not, cannot, lift our thoughts very high. He cannot dismiss, so to speak, the dark spirits whom he evokes. They crowd round him, and his spell is powerless to send them back.

But he has been led up one step. *Fear thou God,* he says; yet he adds little or nothing to open our hearts to God, to tell who, or what, He is whom we are to reverence, or to teach us how to draw strength or comfort from our fear of Him.

It is an evil world, he tells us, in accents that may remind us of a voice but lately silent—full of shams and hollowness; *Fear thou God.* 'Only,' he adds, 'as thy day is short, take what enjoyment God gives thee.' It seems for a moment to be like, but how unlike when we look beneath the surface, 'Take no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.'

There is behind it no such gracious message as 'Fear not, little flock; it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.' It is but a pale prefigurement of 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all other things shall be added unto you.'

'That strain I heard was of a higher mood.'

As we pass, my friends, from this cheerless teaching to the thoughts and services of a Christmas which will have passed before we meet again, may we realize what that Christmas brings us; and enter into the service which to-morrow will bid us 'Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say rejoice.'

[December 20, 1884.]

LECTURE VIII.

Chapters VI, VII, VIII. 15.

At the close of our last study of the Book of Ecclesiastes we left its author at the last verse of his fifth chapter, having once more, for the fourth time, come round to the text that the cheerful enjoyment of the results of his labour was man's best portion here below. It is not that he says 'forget God above and duty below. Live like a hog, since thou diest as the swine die.' But for all that, his teaching is clearly not of a piece with that of Him who bade the thrifty, toiling, anxious Jewish peasant seek, first of all, higher aims than those of the food and raiment of the morrow.

Such a text is, we feel at once, no Gospel message. It will never regenerate a fallen world, or speak peace to the restless intellect, or to the broken heart. It is scarcely necessary in a sanctuary of Christian worship to dwell on the shortcomings, the imperfections, of such teaching. It is enough to remind you, once more, that it is impossible to represent the teaching of this book as adequate or Christian teaching without doing violence to all in it that is most characteristic and most genuine, without distorting 'the Preacher's' words and wresting his language. I must yet once more press upon you that we have in him one raised up to preserve to us the record of the working of the heart of the Jewish people at a time when God was leading them in their onward pilgrimage through a moral and spiritual wilderness which had its own fiery serpents, its own terrors. It was a time when the light that had illuminated their past course was 'fluttering, faint, and low,' all but

extinguished; and the dayspring that was yet to rise upon their path was still below the horizon, barely touching from afar one or other of the heavy clouds that hung above them. It is as studied in this sense, it seems to me, and in this sense only, that these strange and mingled utterances, which by turns attract, repel, bewilder, and instruct, will render up their true meaning and assert their place within the covers of our Bibles. It is only so that we can see that these things also 'were written for our instruction.'

In the three chapters which follow (chapters vi, vii and viii) that meaning, that instruction, is often hard to seize. We see at first sight a mere maze of disconnected reflections; sometimes unintelligible, sometimes contradictory; sometimes prudential, embodied in old familiar maxims; sometimes, on the other hand, exceedingly paradoxical and startling; sometimes intensely and profoundly sad; passing often into sayings that have become household words. The stream of thought runs at times clear, at times turbid, following a zigzag course through the manifold experiences of life; here along quiet and flowery meadows, there through a barren and stony waste. I shall not, of course, attempt to give you a key to all the many difficulties of these chapters. It will be enough if I try to make clear to you, to draw out as plainly as possible, their leading tones.

He returns, then, in the sixth chapter, to the familiar subject of the hollowness, the vanity, of men's pursuits. Already, it would seem, the descendants of the patriarchs, and of the shepherd race whose swords had subdued the fierce tribes of Palestine, had, in default of the inspiring interests of national life, advanced far in that pursuit of wealth—in the devotion to, and mastery of, the arts which secure wealth—which was to become, under similar circumstances, their ruling characteristic in the eyes of nations yet unborn. 'I have looked out,' he says in verse 1, 'as from my post of observation, and seen beneath the sun a sorry sight. Here one heaps up

wealth, and all that wealth can bring of happiness,' *so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not the power to eat thereof*, as we should say, to enjoy it. *A stranger*, some one not of his own blood, not even the son of his adoption, *eateth it*, 'enjoys it, and all his toil is wasted. *This is vanity*, and more, *an evil disease*. It is a canker at the very root of the tree of life.'

'Nay more,' he goes on in verse 3, 'were it otherwise, were a man surrounded by a host of sons, and life indefinitely prolonged[1], yet, if God give him not the gift of enjoyment, mere life, mere riches, mere family blessings, profit him nothing; they do not bring to his soul the one thing that he needs. The untimely birth that comes forth from the darkness, and passes back into the everlasting night, unnamed and forgotten, is better than he: hath a more restful existence, is less uneasy, less at variance with itself, than he who lives, were it for twice a thousand years, in unsatisfied cravings.' That nameless life *hath not seen the sun, nor known anything, yet hath more rest than the other. Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, yet hath he seen no good: do not all go to one place?* (verse 6). That joyless life will end at last, end in the same nothingness that is the doom of fool and wise, of poverty and greatness; men toil and toil and are never satisfied; *all the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. Better*, he cries, *is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire;* better one hour's grasp of substantial happiness than endless wandering after unattainable ends. *That which hath been*, he goes on mournfully, *was already named* (verse 10). Man's fate was fixed long ago. He cannot contend with a power far above him. *There be many things that increase vanity;* wealth, knowledge, pleasure, all human objects, bring out more and more the futility of their pursuit, and enforce

[1] I have followed doubtfully Dr. Ginsburg's interpretation of the difficult words in vi. 3, 'and also that he hath no burial' (A. V.), 'and moreover he have no burial' (R. V.).

each in turn the lesson of man's frailty. 'In this life, in this vain life,' he sadly reiterates the word, 'which man spendeth like a passing shadow, who knoweth,' he ends the chapter by asking, 'what is good for man?' Listen to his words: *For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?* A cloud of irrepressible, inexpressible, melancholy hangs around him; a leaden weight is on the spring of his spirit. It is a sad and gloomy verse, and it strikes, in a measure, the key-note of what follows. For out of this very gloom and sadness come forth in the next chapter (vii) thoughts that, clothed as they are once more in a proverbial form, have gone, some of them, the round of the world. They still come home to the experience of many of us as 'winged words;' far-flying shafts of wisdom, even of highest truth, strangely mingled with sentiments which startle and perplex, bewilder and offend.

Let me place some of them before you side by side; guarding myself against the temptation—shall I say what some might call the specially clerical temptation?—of dwelling only on what seems edifying, and passing over, or explaining away the force of, all that reminds us that we are not sitting at the feet of an Evangelical Prophet of the Old Testament, or a Divine or Apostolic teacher of the New; but of one great in himself, yet less than the least in the kingdom of Heaven.

'Dear,' he says, 'to the human senses,' speaking, remember to an Eastern world, 'is the odour of costly unguents, of sweet frankincense, and fragrant spikenard. But dearer still, more precious still, an honoured name, whose odour attracts the love, and penetrates and fills for a while the whole heart and memory of our friends.' A trite thought it may seem, but it is thrown in the Hebrew into the form of a play on words, not easy to reproduce; and it introduces a parallel line of sterner stuff, followed by others which seem, each in turn, to confront and rebuke the common instincts of humanity. *A*

good name is better than precious spikenard; what follows? *and the day of death than the day of one's birth.* 'Call none happy till he dies,' said the Greek, with the experience and the dread of sudden reverses before his eyes. Our teacher passes on and gives no reason. Those who have studied his earlier words will ask for none. Yet we, my friends, may have learned to borrow in another sense his words; happy, if we can have learned to breathe into them a higher, a less dreary, significance; if we can look on death not merely as a peaceful sleep after 'life's fitful fever,' but as the gate to another life, as the reuniter of the departed. But these are thoughts of which we have no trace in the page before us. The Angel of Death is there; no Angel of Resurrection sits within the sepulchre. And he goes on, in words familiar to us all, to run a tilt, as it were, against all the more natural and obvious feelings of humanity. *It is better*, he says, *to go to the house of mourning*—mourning, remember, for the dead—*than to the house of feasting; sorrow is better than laughter; the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.* Yet need I do more than repeat his words, and ask whether there are not some here who feel that among their best spent hours have been those in which they have shared and lightened the burden of bereavement and of sorrow? To such 'the house of mourning' has been in the very truest sense better 'than the house of feasting.' They know that they have received there more than they have given.

And then, passing, with but a slight thread of obvious connexion, from point to point, he bids us prize the wholesome but distasteful rebuke of the wise above the most gleeful mirth of the foolish, a mirth that dies away as briefly and unprofitably as the short fierce crackling blaze of the dry thorns, when used, not to kindle, but in place of, more substantial fuel—a fire of straw, as we might say (vv. 5, 6). Next, with a passing glance at the evil already dwelt on, the demoralizing effect of extortion and of corruption, *Surely oppression maketh a wise*

man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart[1] (v. 7)—the 'gift' remember, here and elsewhere, is the bribe that corrupts the judge and distorts justice—he drops a hint as to the place in life of calm patience, of waiting to see the end of things. How often in our own experience is, in his words, *the end of a thing better than the beginning thereof;* and he adds a warning, in verse 9, against indulging in bitter feelings: *Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.* How truly had he looked into the petty and needless resentments and estrangements that fill up and disfigure the life of those whom he at once stamps as 'fools.' He passes on to add golden words, needed, doubtless, in the days of Homer and Hesiod, needed, we may well believe, in his own. 'Do not rail,' he says, 'at your own times, be they dark or bright; waste not your hours in asking why this degeneracy, this decline, from the good old time.' *Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this.* He does not add, 'instead of querulous lamentation over what is irretrievably gone, be up and doing, and mend what is amiss in your own day.' Such hopeful lessons he cannot give us. But he does rise out of the gloomy mood in which even wisdom had seemed wholly worthless. He tells us, in verse 11, that *wisdom is good*, not '*with*,' as our version gives it, *but on an equal footing*[2] *with, an inheritance;* that it is a precious legacy from father to son; he knows that 'knowledge is power' to all that see the sunlight. 'Nay, more than this,' he adds, 'wealth may protect men from many evils,' *for wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence:* but 'knowledge is something better. It can quicken a life within; it can give salt and savour to that which wealth may only deaden, and make insipid;' *But the excellence of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it.*

[1] 'The understanding' (R.V.).

[2] 'Wisdom is as good as an inheritance; yea, more excellent is it to them that see the sun' (R. V.).

We seem for a time to have left, with our teacher, the valley of perpetual gloom, and to be walking in genial converse along life's more cheerful highway. But soon the problems of existence reassert themselves; his tone grows sterner; he tries to wring some teaching from the sorrows, even from the anomalies of life. 'Remember,' he says, 'that man cannot mend, cannot foresee his fate.' *Consider*, he says in verse 13, *the work of God, Who can make that straight that He hath made crooked?* 'Enjoy prosperity when it comes. In trouble, *consider*, bethink thee, be calm. God has made both weal and woe: man must drink life's mingled chalice, taste each in turn; to know the future is forbidden him.' *In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider; God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find* out *nothing after him* (verse 14). 'Do not be startled,' he goes on to say, 'by the most terrible paradoxes. I, in my days of vanity, in my pilgrimage through life's illusions, have seen the most baffling of all sights;' and he describes, in verse 15, the spectacle which brought such agony to the Psalmist, and wrung such words of despair from the heart of Job. *There is a just man*—a righteous and good man, *that perisheth in his righteousness*, in spite of his righteousness; *and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in*, in spite of, *his wickedness*. It is, he says, a world in which, though it is ruled by God, yet evil is often successful, good often ends in defeat. And what then? 'Cleave in spite of this,' does he say, 'to goodness?' 'Care for thyself? Strive for the sake of others to enlarge the chances of success for goodness?' Or, 'face all in the faith that the law of right is supreme, after all, over all other rules of life; that somehow, thou knowest not how, and somewhere, thou knowest not where, God will prove the good man's friend?' Ah, no! not yet, at least. *Be not*, he says, in verse 16, *righteous over much*. Do not endanger thyself by useless enthusiasm in

the pursuit of what is, or seems, right. *Why shouldest thou destroy thyself?*

The Jews seek to slay thee, was said by Jewish friends to Him who came to give His life for His friends. It was yet to be impressed on the world, by One who could reach hearts that even a Socrates could not touch, that 'to destroy oneself,' as our Preacher calls it, to give one's life for the cause of truth, to die in the cause of God and of poor humanity, was not to lose one's life, but to save it. *Be not righteous over much! why shouldest thou destroy thyself?* We have heard it said, 'he that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it[1].'

We have touched, it would seem, the very lowest ground of our Preacher's teaching. I will not attempt to place before you the various attempts which have been made to thrust aside the meaning of his words. Turn to too many commentators, and you will find them in abundance. Dare we say that it is merely a touch of satire on some nascent Pharisaism, such as he has glanced at when he bade men use few words rather than many in their approach to God[2]? Or does he not rather mean just what he says, and are the words a deliberate warning against over zeal, over rigour, over enthusiasm, such as might possibly have been heard in English pulpits some two or three generations back? *Be not*, he says, *righteous over much.* But then he turns sharply round and adds, 'Do not therefore rush headlong into wickedness and folly. Its paths are the paths of death. Lay thine hand, it is good to do so,' he adds, 'on the one precept: but do not lose sight of the other. It is he that feareth God that will steer his way between both.' *It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this: yea, also from that withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all* (verse 18). In his coldest, grayest, hour, this sense of the fear of God still smoulders, as it were, within his soul: not indeed the quickening love of God, but something

[1] St. Matt. x. 39. [2] Chap. v. 2.

that inspires reverence; something that saves him from utter shipwreck amidst the crossing and eddying currents of this sunless sea of hopeless pessimism. And then—unconscious it would seem, utterly unconscious, of the effect that his words would have one day on souls trained by a higher teaching—he turns again to the value of wisdom, to its strength and power, and at the same time to the limits of human goodness. *There is not a righteous man upon earth*, he tells us in verse 20, *one that doeth good and sinneth not.* He adds an aphorism, bidding us not pry too deeply into men's judgment on us, not ask too anxiously what they say of us. We may hear, he says, censure where we least expect it, even as we have often censured others. *Take no heed unto all words that are spoken.* It is the very teaching of good sense, and the gathered experience of common life; needed perhaps, not less but more, in days when to be ready at short notice with measured criticism, and to pronounce daily praise or daily censure, have grown into a profession. Its extremest form I read last summer, carved in ancient spelling, over the doorway of a Scottish college[1]. *They have said;—what say they? let them say.* 'Be indifferent to idle praise, or idle blame: to the babble of mankind about thy path in life.'

And having said thus much, the speaker pauses. The old withering, blighting, sense of his powerlessness to grasp real wisdom begins to ache again. *All these things*, he says, in verse 23, *have I proved*, tried, *by wisdom.* 'Here is the result of all my thoughts. Take it for its worth. But wisdom, wisdom worthy of the name, wisdom that should lift me in the scale of being, I have never reached.' *I said, I will be wise, but it was too hard for me. That which was far is still far, that which was deep, is still deep, who can find it out?* He has done his best to read the secret of life, and it is still a riddle.

And now, in his gloomy Eastern mood, he turns to the

[1] Marischal College, at Aberdeen.

darker side, the only one he here recognises, of the relation of the sexes; finds in her, in whom so many souls have recognised a source of light and help, the secret of life's woes.

No 'ministering angel she' in his view. 'I have sought,' he says, 'pondered and studied;' *and I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her* (verse 26). We see at once, as we read his cynical and contemptuous words, that we are in another world than that of the Son of Mary, Who spoke of man and wife as becoming one; Who showed Himself first when He rose from the dead to a woman's eyes; Whose religion has carried with it, has upheld and still upholds, the charter of protection and honour to the wife, the mother, the daughter, and the sister. Sad and weary are the words that follow. *I have sought* (vv. 27, 28), *I have looked, counting one by one; my soul yet seeketh and seeketh in vain, for a true man: yet one such in a thousand I have found; but a true woman*, one worthy of the name, *I have found never and nowhere!* It is another sign of our having passed from the circle of Isaac and Rebekah, of the loving Ruth, of the Shunammite widow, even of the bright picture of the virtuous woman which closes the Book of Proverbs, whose *children rise up and call her blessed*, whose *husband also praises*[1] *her*, and that we are moving in a darker world, amidst more sombre and sadder experiences. 'Yet, after all,' he says, as with a sigh, 'In the beginning it was not so. God made man for higher things.' The story of Eden and of the fall seems to be present to his mind. If so, it is the one direct link with the sacred records of his race that the book offers. *Lo! this only have I found that God made man upright;* 'In the image of God created He him,' *but they* (men) *have sought out many inventions;*— man's restless heart has plunged him into evil.

Of any upward progress of mankind, of any of the real or

[1] Proverbs xxxi. 28.

less real results of the slow education of our race, there is not a word. His view of the history of the human family is not one that leads him for a moment, as it has led men—very earnest and very serious men—in our own day, to try to find a substitute for a faith on which they have lost their hold in idealising what is best and highest in their fellow-men. There is no prospect of our writer being tempted to spell, as we should say, the word Humanity with a capital letter.

Do you find this strange medley of 'reflections upon life' wearying and perplexing? He strikes, in the opening words of the next chapter (viii), another note. The wisdom which he had lately found so hollow, he once more eulogises in half mysterious words, whose sense seems almost veiled as in the ambiguity of an oracle. *Who is as*, none i. e. is *like* unto, *the wise man?* None but the wise can *know the interpretation of things*. *Wisdom*, i. e. a practical wisdom, *lights up the face, and teaches men* (the meaning of the words is obscure) *to command their very countenances and expression* (verse 1).

And with these words he gives a series of precepts, shrouded, as I have said, in hints and faintly-traced suggestions, as to what? a high and ennobling rule of life? No! but the necessity and duty of submission to despotic power. It is very different from the language of St. Paul, bidding the early Christians *submit themselves to the powers that be*[1], *as ordained of God*. There is not a trace of the enthusiastic loyalty of a Hebrew to a native sovereign *whose power loveth righteousness, who judges God's people with righteousness, His poor with judgment; in whose days the righteous flourish, and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth*[2]. Nor do we find the freeman's boldness, with which an Elijah could confront an apostate or a tyrant king. That fire is spent! The counsels here, as where he recurs to the same subject in the last five verses of chapter x, are those of submission, forbearance, self-control, prudence, in dealing

[1] Romans xiii. 1. [2] Psalm lxxiii. 7

with a power irresistible, overbearing, often oppressive, yet which carries within itself the seeds of decay. Such advice may well have been needed by a generation of Jews, proud, intractable, detesting foreign rule, and groaning under the tyranny of an alien monarch. It is scarcely such as a Solomon would have proffered to his fellow Hebrews, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh. '*Keep*, he says, *the king's commandment; remember the oath of allegiance*, imposed upon or taken freely by you. *Go not in haste from his presence; do not* rise up, *stand erect*, to protest *at any evil* word or act. Remember that his power is unlimited; *He doeth whatsoever pleaseth him. Where the word of a king is, there is power, and who may say unto him, What doest thou?*' (vv. 2–4). We are reading, as we see at once, counsels of Eastern submission to an Eastern despot. Two centuries ago they were sometimes quoted from English pulpits, to convince Englishmen that the king's will was by right and by God's Word above law, and that Charters, and Statutes, and Acts of Parliament, and all the ancient or hard-won liberties of our island race were worthless things[1]. 'Obey,' he goes on in verse 5 to say, 'and obedience will ward off evil;' and then, in what seem ambiguous and stammering accents, he hints that redress will come. *Time and judgment*, he says twice over, *come*, as the wise man knows, *to all things; wait awhile, and oppression will work its own remedy*. I can hardly ask you to follow me through the obscurity of the text, often quite unintelligible in our own and other versions. He seems to say that the misery caused by a tyrant presses heavily on himself, is a weight that will bring him down at last; that his eyes are blinded to the future—none can read it to him; that all his power will not aid him to retain his spirit, or keep his doom at bay; that Death admits no exemption when he calls

[1] One of the most interesting of such sermons is that preached by Dr. Sybthorpe, at Northampton, in the year 1626, entitled 'Apostolike Obedience.'

in his conscripts, and that no evil arts will save the wicked (vv. 5–9). The language seems studiedly dark, yet to be a suggestion of the teaching of one side of human history, the fall, the merited fall, of unrighteous tyrants. *There is*, after all, *a God above us*, he seems to whisper, and he throws into the hint a whole treasure of consolation.

But, yet again, as he would fain pour balm into the open wounds of an oppressed race, his own wounds bleed afresh. The sense of a misruled world is never long banished from his thoughts. Through the darkness of the words that follow we discern an image, shrouded and half seen, of the successful oppressor, prosperous in life, honoured in burial, and of mankind sick and fevered and demoralized by the sight. *Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil* (verse 11). We think of military despotisms, corrupt rulers, of freedom crushed and conscience coerced; or again of the crimes of Nihilism, the excesses of a Jacquerie, of September massacres, of sudden assassinations, of strange conspiracies burrowing beneath the thrones of prosperous empires.

But the mind of this watcher of human life sways backwards and forwards with life's shifting scene. 'The contradictions of life,' it has been well said, 'reflect themselves in his musings[1].' 'Man hurries; God is patient.' He comforts himself with the ineradicable sense that God must be on the side, not of might, but of right. *Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him: but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God* (vv. 12, 13).

Yet scarcely have the words crossed his lips when the bitter sense of a sadder reading of history mocks his hope and derides his faith—'This also is vanity.' *There be just*

[1] Dean Plumptre.

men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I SAID THAT THIS ALSO IS VANITY (verse 14). The riddle has recurred again, and he cannot solve it. Once more—it is for the fifth time—he turns back to the only ground that seems quite sure. 'Man has no better course open than just to take the enjoyments of the present, to eat, and drink, and rejoice in the fruit of his labour.' *Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and drink and be merry; for that shall abide with him of his labour all the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.* It is the last verse that I shall read to-day. So the baffled thinker comes down again to earth from his flight into higher thought.

When I say 'higher' you will understand what I mean. I am not thinking of those prudential maxims, however wise, framed though they be to stand the test of centuries, of the wear and tear of time, and of a transference to other races and other centres of reflection and experience.

Among these he moves often with a singular felicity of thought and expression; at times, no doubt, as I need hardly remind you, with an obscurity of utterance, possibly half intentional, even if largely owing to the nature of the language in which he necessarily clothes his thoughts. But for a moment he has pierced through the ring which has confined him to the interests of common life, and risen also above his own dark misgivings; and there has flashed across his soul for a moment the certainty that there is a power in the world that 'makes for righteousness,' a divine and supreme law behind all the puzzles and anomalies of life, which will solve them all. He lays his hand on this, but he cannot grasp it; and, finding no sure and solid ground in those loftier regions, he bids his readers, the men of his own uncertain day—a day, doubtless of trouble, and rebuke, and blasphemy—to plant their feet on the one green patch of earth left them in the

waste; to seize the one thing which shall abide with them of all their labour. Let them enjoy what God has given them, the fruit of their toil.

It must have been, my friends—let us say it once more—a dreary time that was fit for no higher teaching. Such a standing ground could be but a temporary aid, a rock of passing shelter from a stormy hour. To something better he may yet be guided. But seven times over, before he ends, he will have bidden men take refuge in it. Did he say it 'seventy times seven,' we should feel that he has not spoken to us his final message, that he has yet something better to say, could he frame his lips to utter it. We may find such counsel in Greek or Roman lyric, or in Persian poet; but we know that it will never satisfy the human soul; and our teacher has felt that touch of God's enlightening spirit, he has had that partial vision of higher things and of a higher law, which will never let him rest in a call to mere repose, to mere enjoyment. We need not grudge him this illusory gleam. It will soon pass, and a cloud, more ennobling than the passing sunshine of 'this fair soft present,' will gather round him; and through that cloud will come some light to lead him onwards. But the cloud will still be there, and the pilgrim will yet press on with aching feet, for he knows that it is better to do so than to rest content with the unsatisfying teaching which from time to time he utters. We shall follow him next week through another group of strange and mingled phantoms that will not let him rest. But we shall feel that, after all, his trouble is a higher thing than his tranquillity; that, in his own words, 'it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting.'

[JANUARY 3, 1885.]

LECTURE IX.

Chapter VIII. 16, to end of Chapter X.

Those who have at all followed the course of these Lectures will have recognised that no attempt has been made to put before them the book with which they are concerned in the form of a systematic or methodical treatise, or address, on any one single clearly marked and definite subject.

Great pains have been taken from the very first to let the author speak for himself. No attempt has been made to force upon him any fixed purpose at all, other than that of 'thinking aloud'—the phrase has been borrowed more than once already—of thinking aloud the manifold, the sometimes conflicting, views, precepts, and feelings, that he was moved and guided to utter. These we have looked on as coming to us from an age which I do not attempt to fix—for we have no adequate data for doing so—but which was obviously one, in which the firm faith in a present and righteous God, leading on the people of Israel towards a promised goal, and rebuking and chastising them whenever they turned aside, was, if not dead, yet benumbed or sleeping. Viewed in this light the book still presents many difficulties, but its general tone and substance become fairly plain, and, if I may venture to say so, exceedingly interesting and exceedingly instructive.

For myself, the very contrast between what I read here and the language of so much besides in my Bible and my Prayer-book gives a fresh and welcome value to much in these last, that had grown, or was in danger of growing, familiar and commonplace. The simplest Collect, in which

the Christian utters one prayer to God, seems to me—I know not whether it is so to any here—to gain a new force and beauty, as I read or hear it, after following the lead of one who taught the only wisdom that the Church could reach under that hour of darkness. The very least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Yet the least in the kingdom of Heaven may learn much from the strivings and heart-searchings of a soul, that felt the enduring problems of this baffling scene, and was stirred and moved to place on record, and was permitted to win room in the Sacred Canon for, a picture of a stage in the education of his race of the profoundest and most impressive interest.

Let us go on to-day to follow towards its close this strange outpouring of the sad experience of one who seems to sit alone and watch his fellow-men drifting this way and that on the aimless waves of life, and to utter from time to time some words of guidance to a passing shelter.

He begins again, in the last two verses, the 16th and 17th, of chapter viii, to tell us of his own efforts to find a solution to the enigmas of which the air is full. *He has applied his heart to know wisdom* and to watch the ceaseless toil of life. *When I applied mine heart,* he says in the 16th verse, *to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth.* He has looked out once more on toiling humanity, toiling then as now—the sunrise bringing back *opera atque labores*, even now, as in the days of Virgil, or when the Psalmist wrote *The sun ariseth, and man goeth forth to his work and to his labour till the evening*[1]. Many of us here know well the meaning of the words. *There is*, he adds, whether thinking of the meditative student, or the night-watching soldier, or the anxious care-harassed statesman, we cannot say, *for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes.* All this strange scene I have watched and studied, and what is the result?

[1] Psalm civ. 23.

All the labour of man is for his mouth, he has already said. The answer then is simple. Man toils to sustain life. The bee works, the swallow spends long days on the wing, the wolf ravins, with one and the same object. All life, we are sometimes told, may be resolved into two or three primary instincts. But look at it, he says in the next verse, in another light, as *the work of God beneath the sun*, as ordered by a Being whom we are to worship and to reverence, and who has put other cravings into the human heart, than this desire to fill his mouth with good things, and all takes another and a darker hue. That simple answer fails to satisfy. *Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it.* The whole spectacle becomes confused and dark, yea more, unknowable; *yea, farther; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it* (v. 17). What then? does he put aside this, the 'unknown and the unknowable,' and find refuge in what he has already five times told us is our only solace, quiet and restful enjoyment of the moment? There is that in him which will not let him find comfort here. We turn to the 1st verse of the ninth chapter, and we find that the inexorable voice within, that prompted him to speak first of all, will not let him rest in this; it is better, it tells him, to beat against the bars of his prison-house than merely to smile and feast for the passing hour. How can I, he seems to say, as I look at what the spectacle of human life daily reveals, at the tragedy that meets my eyes? *For all this have I considered, proved, and tried*—his words in the original[1] are of exceeding strength. What? *that the righteous and the wise and their works*, all they do in this toilsome world, *are in the hand of God.* It seems at first sight a welcome and calming and consoling thought. We think of the Psalmist's words, *My times are in Thy hands*, or of the words of Jesus, *Your*

[1] 'All this I laid to my heart, even to explore all this' (R. V.).

Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. Ah, no! it is another, and a desolating and withering lesson that comes home to him from what he sees. *No man knoweth either the love or the hatred that lie*, both alike, *before them*, veiled in the future; the river of life along which his course lies is wrapped in mist. Man's destiny is wholly dark, and is out of his own control. But it is not man's ignorance that cuts him to the heart, it is, that the injustice of earthly tribunals seems to have its counterpart in a higher region. No goodness, no righteousness will avail against the persistent injustice of the laws by which the world seems ruled. See what a half blasphemous indictment, what passionate recalcitration, against the God whose fear is in his mouth, is embodied in the cold and calm despair of the words that follow in the next verse. It is a terrible reading of the 'Analogy of Nature.' *All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth*, sweareth rashly, *as he that feareth an oath* (verse 2). There is no mark at all, he says, of a moral government in this world. The Providence of God is as indiscriminating as the falling tree, or the hungry tiger, or the desolating famine. If 'the fittest survive' for a time, that fitness has nothing in common with goodness or righteousness. Truly our thinker 'thinks aloud.' Whatever dark thoughts stir within his soul, they come forth freely, and he gives them soon, if possible, a still more poignant and distressful tone. The greatest of all evils beneath the sun, he says in the 3rd verse, is this. Life is full of evil: fever and madness are in men's veins, are in their heart, he says while they live; and then comes death; *yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.* And death is not merely the nothingness that man shares with the beast, the wise with the fool, or

a mere escape from the sorrows of life. But death itself, coming, as it does, in mocking impartiality to the good and the evil, is an insult and a wrong. Is it possible for human misery and despair to speak in sharper accents? *This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all* (v. 4).

But his moan grows deeper. Even the gift of life is something. It has at least the sense of being, and the capacity for hope; *for to him that is joined to all the living there is hope.* Even at worst, it has the consciousness of something, though that something be death itself, yet to come. *A live dog*, he says in bitterness—and remember with what contempt and scorn the Jewish and kindred races looked on what we and our forefathers have for ages treated as the intelligent and faithful companion and friend of man—*a dog in life is better than the kingly lion in death* (v. 4).

And then, in even sadder strain than he has yet used, he speaks of the appalling finality of the doom of death; the entire and hopeless end; the blotting out of this life's story; the entire absence of even the memory of men's names. And his words come to us with an added pathos, if they were written in those dark and later centuries in which the inner history of the Jewish nation has disappeared from human memory, almost as a train of travellers is lost to sight in a tunnel under some solid mountain; or like a river hidden for a while and running its sunless course beneath the surface of the earth, which elsewhere it fertilized and gladdened. *For the living*, he says, *know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun* (vv. 5, 6). The book of life is open for a while, but death shuts it for ever.

> 'Our noisy years seem moments in the being
> Of the eternal silence.'

And then suddenly, and in a moment, his half fierce, half solemn mood seems to change; and, with an abruptness absolutely startling, he returns, for the sixth time, to the precept, not of meeting and sounding the problem, but of turning from it, and, if the skies are dark above, lighting the festal lamp within.

The advice is more detailed and more emphatic than it has been before. The pendulum swings back with fresh force to its full length. There might seem almost a touch of irony in his language.

Go thy way, we read in the 7th verse, *eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.* This, at least, He approveth, this thankful enjoyment. Again, *Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.* Wear at all times the festal garment; let no 'oil of gladness,' no scent and perfume, be lacking to thy head. Again, *Live joyfully with her whom thou lovest all the days* of this short and frail life given thee: *all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun* (v. 9). 'All the days of the life of thy vanity.' Short and frail the life! The skeleton is handed round even at the marriage feast. Yes, short and frail; and in the near distance is Death. Take enjoyment, he tries to say, and welcome the activity which gives life interest. And he goes on, in verse 10, *Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.* It is not, we must feel, the wise counsel to forget, in vigorous and useful activity, those questions in life which are insoluble, but it is merely secondary to the main thought, that the end is near, the end of all things. *For there is no work*, he adds, *nor device, nor wisdom, in the grave whither thou goest.*

Need I once more say that we have no gospel here? There may be—it is possible—there may be those among the fortunate, the healthy, the well-to-do, among those who

feel no need of a gospel at all, who can tell us, as some have told us, that they are not aware that the entire disappearance of religion would very greatly affect the world in which they live. Such men may listen to such language with equanimity. And there may have been a condition of thought, of life, and of society, in which it may have formed an element in the best counsel that could be given. But we feel at once, let me say it once more, that such a time must have been an evil time, a time in which the moral and spiritual nerve of mankind must have been almost paralysed; and we can hardly wonder that Christian Father and Jewish Paraphraser vied with each other in translating the words—plain and clear as they are—into a wholly different language, and forced them to render up quite opposite teaching.

If St. Jerome interpreted the bread and wine, of which the Preacher speaks, as the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Chaldee Paraphraser does not fall behind. It will interest you to listen for a moment to his version[1]: 'Go,' the Lord of the world will one day say to the righteous, 'go, eat with joy the bread which has been laid up for thee, (in return) for the bread which thou hast given to the poor and needy which were a hungered. Drink with a good heart the wine which has been preserved for thee in Paradise, (in return) for the wine which thou hast mingled to the poor and needy which were thirsty. For, behold, thy good work has long been acceptable before the Lord.' Need I add after this, that, with Jew and Christian alike, the 'white garments' express, not festivity at all, but freedom from sin; that the festal ointment means anything else than its literal sense; that 'whatsoever thy hand findeth to do' is closely limited to works of charity and goodness?

It is so throughout; and lessons, sometimes noble and edifying, sometimes trivial and foolish, are wrung from all that is stern and grim, paradoxical or baffling.

[1] It is given in full in Dr. Ginsburg's edition.

Let us resolutely put aside these voices that call upon us on the left hand and the right, and pursue a steady path through the actual words, and actual thoughts and feelings, of the book which we are studying. Scarcely has our Preacher, for the sixth time, and in the most impressive manner, bidden his readers turn from the confusing problems of the present and the certain darkness of the future, to find rest in joyful contentment with the present, than the unappeaseable pain awakes within, and he turns once more to the stage and theatre of human life. He has spoken in tragic accents of the powerlessness of virtue, or religion, or fidelity, to mend or prolong the life of man. He has spoken before of the common end which awaits the extremes of human folly and human wisdom. 'Be it so,' he has said, 'let us not reason on the future, but enjoy the present.'

But he has not yet found an opiate for his pain. The course of life is full of wrongs, like that greatest of all wrongs, the doom of death. It is not only in the grave that wisdom profits nothing. Even in this life it avails but little.

Contemptible as folly is, yet it is often stronger than wisdom. The wise man must make up his mind to failure, to ingratitude, to submission to those who are in truth his inferiors, to evil rulers and their wôrthless favourites. The world is ruled by no certain law: at any rate, it is none to which wisdom has the key.

I returned, he says in the 11th verse, *and saw under the sun*, as I started afresh on my range over the scene of life, *that the race is not to the swift*—is he borrowing his imagery from the storehouse of Greek life on which St. Paul drew so freely?—*nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.*

All things, he had said before, have their fixed time, and that time, like that which we call 'chance,' is something which human wisdom cannot alter, nay, which it cannot even

foresee. The law that rules it is beyond our ken. *For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them* (verse 12). You can neither force the hand of your fate, nor read your fortune.

He could hardly have expressed in more hopeless language the utter weakness of man in the presence of the overpowering forces which surround him. Habakkuk had used the same image of the uncared-for fishes 'that have no ruler' in one of the most moving and plaintive passages in sacred literature[1]. But Habakkuk rises further on, mounts, he says, 'on hinds' feet,' to heights of faith and joy and oneness with God such as our pilgrim never reaches. To him who speaks to us, life is, thus far, something in which neither goodness nor prudence avails anything.

How different from the cautious yet less cheerless estimate of the great divine of the last century, who, with the profoundest sense of the melancholy side of human life and of the ignorance of man, does see 'even in the infinite disorders, the greatest confusion of human affairs,' 'the beginnings of a righteous administration even in nature;' does say that 'we have a declaration from Him, Who is supreme in nature, that He is on the side of goodness[2].' How different again from the optimistic voice of his own latest, and, in his own way, sympathetic French critic, M. Renan, who tells young men 'Life is not vanity; I have found it good and noble, worthy of the zest you feel for it'—has even compared the course of life to a pleasant walk taken for enjoyment. No, says our student of wisdom, wisdom at times seems omnipotent. It is no doubt a power, but it is overborne and overruled in these evil days. It may save a city, it does not follow that it will aid its possessor. It

[1] Habakkuk i. 14, and iii. 17–19.

[2] Butler's Analogy, Part I, Chap. iii.

cannot count on gratitude or fame. 'It saveth others, itself it cannot save.' And then follows a singular and suggestive apologue, or tale, by the aid of which men have eagerly, if vainly, striven to fix the date of him who tells it. There is the little beleaguered town, with its handful of defenders, and the great king outside with his huge army, piling up their mounds so as to overtop its walls. *There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man. Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard* (vv. 14–16).

It is only in the day of crisis that wisdom wins respect from power and riches. Or, if it is true that words of wisdom are listened to in the calm in which they are uttered more readily than the loud blustering of a leader among fools—if it is true that wisdom is better than weapons of war, and that a thinking brain is a power greater than that of cannon, or batteries, or ironclads, even in war, yet *one sinner*, one blunderer, he seems to mean, may undo the fruits of much wisdom. *The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good* (vv. 17, 18).

The writer is now launched in a course of reflections conveyed once again in a proverbial form, at times obscure, at times clear as crystal. He deals in oriental manner with various phases of oriental life, in words interesting, not least of all, as throwing some faint light on the state of society in which they were uttered. We welcome—do we not?—a short relief from the tension and strain of his bitter musings.

The first three verses of the tenth chapter merely emphasise the difference between wisdom and folly—a favourite

text—to which, in spite of his mournful sense of the unprofitableness of any attainable amount of wisdom, our thinker clings with instinctive tenacity.

'As dead flies, putrefying in the sweet perfume, turn a delicious odour to a fetid stench, so may a little folly spread its paralysing leaven over high and honoured gifts.' *Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary* (the perfumer, i.e. a great trade in an Eastern city), *to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour.* Of how many sad stories, of how many biographies, written and unwritten, might the adage be the motto!

> 'the little rift within the lute
> That by and by will make the music mute.'

Then follow two couplets, so to speak, cast in the form of almost Arab sayings, of the contrast between the wise man and the fool. The one with his heart, i.e. his mind, ready, at his right side, as he walks along the track that images the way of human life, ready to sustain and guide him; the other, the fool, with his wits at the left side, not available when needed to lean upon. And the fool is pictured as wandering helplessly along the familiar highway, and proclaiming to all his folly. *A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left. Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool* (vv. 2, 3). But this wisdom, at times so decried, at times so prized, is now to be used as a necessary guide in dealing with rulers whose power is unlimited. *Start not up,* he says, as though giving a manual or guide to a courtier in an Eastern court, 'quit not thy place because satrap or ruler bursts out in wrath against thee.' *If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place: for yielding pacifieth great offences* (verse 4). 'Bear it patiently; a calm forbearance will outlive many storms of passion.' And then, in half-veiled and cautious language, he speaks of the ineradicable evils of Oriental or semi-oriental courts, where the

barber and the eunuch hold the reins of power. *There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as an error which proceedeth from the ruler; folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place. I have seen slaves*, he whispers, *upon horses, and princes walking as slaves upon the earth* (vv. 5, 6, 7).

What a field for illustration the words suggest! What a touch of satire on ages of monotonous misgovernment! But, he seems to add, in the eighth and three following verses, 'bear such evils quietly. Do not be too eager to rush forth to amend them. Eastern subject, Eastern statesman, be wary and on thy guard.'

He that diggeth a pit may chance to fall into it.

He that taketh down a stone wall, so the word *hedge* should[1] be turned, *may disturb a sleeping serpent. The taking down*— or is it the quarrying? *of stones, the mere hewing of trees and wood is a task of danger.* Another warning, *If the axe which you use is blunt, you must put forth ten-fold strength: wisdom will give edge and ease to all your efforts.* Once more, *If a serpent bite for lack of charming, the serpent*[2] *charmer will be no gainer*, or, *of no avail* (vv. 8, 9, 10, 11).

They are all maxims suggesting wariness and caution in dealing with the powers that be; powers evidently neither loved nor trusted by him who teaches the way to deal with them. He turns aside for one moment to pour contempt upon 'the fool,' the wise man's opposite:

A wise man's words gain him grace and favour; the lips of a fool swallow up himself; are his own worst enemies.

He begins with words of folly, he ends with worse, *with mischief and madness.*

He is full of words, endless in loquacity. He has no

[1] 'Whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him. Whoso heweth out stones shall be hurt therewith,' R. V.

[2] 'If the serpent bite before it be charmed, then is there no advantage in the charmer,' R. V.

sense of ignorance. *Man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him?* 'Man knows not what shall be: none can write or tell the story of the future. The wise man is modest, the fool has no such scruple' (vv. 12, 13, 14).

'Speech is silver, silence golden,' is a maxim with which we are familiar; there are many such maxims, far older, in the East. I have heard that in an Arab tent, if one of the party indulge in an unwelcome loquacity, an elder will say to him, 'Pray to God'—Say thy prayers, i.e. to one greater, and prate not.

He sums up his description of folly by obscure words that seem to say: 'The labour of a fool wearies all men: it is always futile; for he has not sense even to find his way along the one great road, that which leads to the city.' *The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city* (verse 15). And after this fresh series of adages, he turns round to the evil days in which his own lot was cast; or, at all events, to the evils incident to the government with which he was familiar. *Woe to thee, O land,* he cries in verse 16, *whose king is a child,* a child in years or heedless as a child; *whose princes feast in the morning.*—It is a rebuke common alike to the world of the Hebrews and of Cicero, aimed at those who commenced their feasts and revelry before the morning hours of the working day were over. 'Happy the land whose ruler is no upstart adventurer, but the son of kingly sires, and whose princes have simple tastes; who eat for manly strength, do not feast for revelry.' *Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning! Blessed art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!* 'Through the slothfulness of rulers,' he goes on to hint, 'the fabric of the state decays; the neglected roof lets the water through. And meantime there is high revelry within the palace walls; and gold and silver supply

all their needs.' *By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through. A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry: but money answereth all things* (vv. 7, 18, 19). We have once more a touch of satire, turned, I hardly dare say to what strange teaching, by commentators of all ages and creeds. We may see in it a life-like glance into the condition of, shall we say, some native state within our Indian frontier? or some Eastern empire tottering to its fall nearer home? or an European monarchy at the close of the last century, with luxury and state in the palace, and a hungry people outside its door, and the shadow of the guillotine, and head-crowned pikes and September massacres, in the background?

'But lay thy hand upon thy mouth,' he says in the closing verse, 'give no vent to thine indignation.' *Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.* I will not ask you to follow me into the curious and manifold misinterpretations of these almost proverbial words. To you and me they speak plainly enough of the universal espionage of a government that rests on force, and makes no efforts to plant its foundations on righteousness. Why distract you, or divert you from a serious to a trifling mood, by substituting every kind of patristic or rabbinical allegory for interpretation?

We have followed our Preacher to-day through a devious maze. He has brought us face to face with immemorial questions, old as human thought, and has then conducted us to the far-off by-ways and still courts of the most stagnant forms of Eastern life; to habits and modes of thought as far as possible removed from our own.

He is now drawing near his close. The voice that has spoken sometimes so clearly, sometimes so obscurely, sometimes so sadly, yet again and again with an attempt to win cheerfulness from the very jaws of despair—will soon

be hushed. It will go back to the silence from whence it came. May we, who have followed with some touch of sympathy the sadness of his words, and have tried to find and recognise whatever of truer light was flashed upon his soul by Him who spake to them of old by diverse measures and in sundry ways, be able, not the less, but the more, to enter into the higher teaching which told us lately to 'rejoice in the Lord always,' to enter into the sorrows and perplexities of life, and yet to be of good cheer in Him who has overcome the world!

[JANUARY 10, 1885.]

LECTURE X.

Chapters XI and XII.

The two closing chapters on which I must speak to-day are the only portions of the Book of Ecclesiastes which form part of our Sunday Services. They are read as the First Lesson on the last Sunday of the Christian Year. And if the view now largely adopted be correct—a view which seems, I confess, to have much to commend it—that they are the final portion of the very latest of the books of the Old Testament Scriptures; that they represent the sigh, so to speak, for more light, the sense of weariness and dejection that falls sometimes upon the troubled human spirit as the night becomes more intense before the first glimmering of dawn, we feel at once the strange and striking fitness of their place, intentional or otherwise, in the Calendar of our Church.

We shall find in these two short but memorable chapters the same main lines of thought and feeling which we have already met. There is the same under-current of practical wisdom, clothing itself in a proverbial form, obscure at times as a Delphic oracle, the sense lost in the integuments, so to speak, of words and phrases to which we have no certain key, often clear and lucid as the English or Scottish proverbs, to which their language corresponds. For instance, *It is better to sow the seed than to watch the wind*, or, *He who stares at the clouds will not finish his reaping*, are maxims which, in one form or another, may have been as familiar to Boaz

and his reapers in the days of Ruth as to labouring men on the vast plains of Western America, or in the cornfields of Kent or Midlothian.

But they touch also, as we shall see, a deeper vein.

First, we shall find the same profound sense of the ignorance and powerlessness of man. The secret of life, and of the government of the world, will be recognised as something unknown, and if not as in itself unknowable, yet as hidden under an impenetrable cloud. We shall still seem to hear the sad music of the words:

'Behind the veil, behind the veil.'

And secondly, we shall find a sense, just indicated before, of the sweetness of life. Nature will for a moment 'fill' even our sad preacher's 'lap with treasures of her own.' And for a moment he will answer her smile, and accept her gifts.

For a moment only. He will still be haunted by the abiding and inexorable shadow of the days of darkness, the many days that are to come.

And thirdly, and as before, he will yet once more bid men rejoice, rejoice in the sense of youth, and use the hours of sunlight that are given, before the everlasting night falls upon their little day.

All this, nearly all this, we have had, you will say, before. But two or three fresh elements of thought will show themselves.

There is one, the sad and gloomy picture of old age and life's decay, that will give a darker hue to the 'dusky strand of death, inwoven here' with all the tissues of the joys of life. But one or two others will contain within them the germs, the germs only, of a higher teaching which was yet to come; that teaching in the light of which we can read without dismay the words in which he pictures the trouble of his soul.

I. First, he will speak to us, in clearer accents than before, of a judgment, a future, an unerring, a Divine judgment. He

will insert the warning in the very heart of his call to enjoyment; as a salt that should save human joy from corruption and rottenness. And the last words of the epilogue that closes the book which holds his thoughts, whether written by himself or another, will repeat and emphasise the truth. The Judge of all the world will yet do right.

II. And, secondly, he will hover on the very verge of a surer hope of life beyond the grave. I shall not venture to tell you, as many will tell you, that he is commissioned fully to reveal and announce that hope. But his hand will be on the opening door. 'The dust goes to dust.' 'The spirit,' he will tell us, 'mounts up to the keeping of the God who gave it.'

I have given this summary of his thoughts before entering on them in detail. Some such guidance may aid as well as interest you. And you, my friends, if I may so call this, to me, almost pathetically interesting congregation of, for the most part, total strangers, who have thus far followed me so patiently, will bear with me if I have trespassed once more on your forbearance and your time.

Let us now follow the course of the Preacher's own words; of his own, so far as we can catch their sometimes doubtful meaning; not of the strange glosses, and sometimes astounding interpretations, with which they have been so often overlaid and darkened.

We open the eleventh chapter. He leaves, in the first verse, the atmosphere of the court, and comes back to the sphere of life's common duties. *Cast thy bread*, he says, *upon the waters*. Do not be afraid of showing kindness, even where thou seest no prospect of result or return; let the flat cake of bread, the type of food to the hungry, aid to the needy, float down the stream of life. Thou wilt find one day that thou hast hit thy mark; won some grateful heart. *Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days.* Do good, said He who

went about doing good, hoping for nothing in return[1]. Call to thy feast those who cannot call thee. Thou shalt be recompensed one day. *Give*, our teacher goes on, *a portion of thy means* not to one or two, but to many, *to seven or even more.* 'Let a generous, an open-handed mercy do her full work. One day, we in turn, may be in need of the aid we give to-day.' *Thou knowest not what evil may be upon the earth.* We cannot alter, he repeats—a lesson familiar to him—the inexorable laws by which the world is ruled. *When the clouds are charged with rain, the rain must fall, and as the tree falls, so the tree must lie; south or north, as the tempest forces it to the ground* (v. 3). It is not yours to seal up the clouds, or guide the storm-wind, or to give the tree strength to resist its violence. Need I detain you to dwell on any one of the strange uses to which the words have been applied? 'But,' he adds, 'do not let this sense of a power above thine own unnerve thy arm. Be beneficent in life, be munificent; be also active, up and doing. The sower who stays his hand to watch the winds will let the seed-time pass. The reaper who waits for the clouds to disperse will miss the harvest.' *He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.* Again, *the secret of the first dawn of life is hidden from thee* (verse 5); dark to him, dark to the keenest physiologist of our own day. So is the mystery, he adds, of the working of the God who is the maker of all things; *even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.*

'God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform.'

But thy course is clear. Do thou thy proper work. *In the morning sow*, husbandman, *thy seed, in the evening withhold not thine hand.* In the morning of life be active; slumber not through its decline. Use well the gifts of youth; use, too, the special gifts of age. Thou knowest not which shall bear

[1] St. Luke vi. 35, and xiv. 12–14.

good fruit: it may be both. *For thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good* (verse 6. R. V.). And then follows once more the old familiar call, not to beneficence, not to activity, but to the full enjoyment of life's gladder, simpler side. 'Ah,' he says, for the first time, in the seventh verse, 'life is sweet.' *Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun.* The sight of the travelling sun, to see which is with him, as with the Homer with whom he may possibly have been familiar, a synonym for life, no longer fills him, as it once did, with weariness and gloom. But he cannot rise to the glad message of nature, to the momentary throbbing of life within his veins. He remembers, even through enjoyment and sunshine, the long days of darkness; that he must pass in due time 'from sunlight to the sunless land.' *Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun: but if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity* (verse 8). Yes, all that lies before him, he tells us once more, is vanity.

But for all this, he utters for the seventh and last time, the call to a cheerful use of life's common gifts. He utters it in somewhat altered form, and for the first time balances it and steadies it with a strain of a higher mood. *Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth;*

> 'If nature put not forth her power
> About the opening of the flower,
> Who is it that could live an hour?'—

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth; and, he adds boldly, *walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes* (verse 9).

I will not detain you with the various modes in which commentators, and even translators, have shown their terror, their horror, at the words; how the one have wrested their

plain sense, the other freely inserted a negative here, a qualifying adverb there; made them contain nothing more than an almost conventional admonition to a guarded and blameless life. Let *us* take them as they stand, take them with what follows, as a lesson of freedom, followed by a lesson of responsibility. For then comes, for the first time clearly expressed, what before has been a dim thought just seen, then put by. *But know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.* For all this, remember that thou art not a mere animal of higher type, free to gratify each prevailing instinct at thy pleasure. There is a judgment before thee. *For all these things God will bring thee into judgment.* Thou must stand one day before His judgment-seat.

To the question, what and where is this judgment? he has no answer, no clear answer. Do we think, as some bid us, of the civil or social penalties which may wait on unbridled indulgence? or of the physical decay and pain which may one day visit those who live in violation of the laws of health? We turn from the thought of either suggestion with a sense that it is inadequate, utterly inadequate, to fill up the framework of the words, terrible in their naked simplicity: *Know thou, that for all this God will bring thee to judgment.* Let us leave them where we find them, written side by side with the call to enjoyment, hanging, as it were, in the sky—vague, undefined, unexplained, yet not to be conjured away or treated as of little moment.

And *therefore*, he goes on, with this to guide thee, *remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away pain from thy flesh;* afflict not thy body by any hermit's rule; for those early days of life, *childhood and youth, are but vanity;* they pass and are gone; they will be gathered to 'the days that are no more.' But God's judgment will not pass (v. 10.)

Strange mingling of the call not to put aside the fleeting joys of life with the warning voice that tells of judgment to

come! And the two voices are mingled in the accents of the stately and majestic passage with which his closing chapter opens (chapter xii. 1).

Remember thy Creator—Him who made thee, Him who will judge thee—*in the days of thy youth and strength.* It will be too late to turn to Him when they are gone. *Remember Him* now, *ere the evil days come, or the years of which thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.*

And then follows the world-famous picture of decay and death. It is a picture not necessarily of old age in itself; but of old age viewed on the side of its being the mere decline through pain and weakness to the grave. We who have known, thank God, how many souls have been enabled to look on the days of such decline as no evil days, but to take gently the lessons of failing strength, and to use what strength is left for the good of others and the service of God, need not shrink from this dark picture. Still less will we attempt to destroy its impressive effect by analysing every successive image, and reducing it to a hideous catalogue of the decay of each separate organ of the body. Let me read them with no more paraphrase—at times conjectural paraphrase—than is necessary to remove obscurity and bring out their pathetic force.

The light of youth will have fled, and darkness, so often associated with pain and sorrow, will have come. *Remember thy* Creator, *ere the sun and the daylight and the moon and stars be darkened; ere*, he goes on, *the clouds return after the rain.* The passing shower will have been replaced by unending and ceaseless gloom. 'The tear forgot as soon as shed, the sunshine of the breast,' will have given place to habitual sadness. *In the day*, he continues—calling up before us the image of a busy household ceasing from their daily tasks and pleasures, under the paralysing terror of some unearthly darkness—*in the day when the keepers of the house*, the door-keepers and sentinels, *shall tremble;* and *the strong men*, the lords of the house,

its stately masters, *shall bow their heads*, and the poor women grinding corn at evening become few, and cease their labour; and the ladies who look from the casements are wrapped in darkness; and the door is closed towards the hushed street; and the sound, once so loud, of the busy handmill is faint, and the shrill cry of the storm-bird rings high, and *all the daughters of music* (is it the song-birds, or the singing women?) *are brought low*, are hushed and silent.

'Then there shall be terror of that which is in the sky above, and fear shall beset the highway'—it is a picture of gloom and darkness enveloping the scene. 'In the days,' he goes on, though his meaning is, for a moment, lost in the obscurity of his language, melodious and rhythmical, but exceedingly perplexing, 'in the days when the dainty almond shall no longer please the palate, nor salted locust, nor caper-berry, nor aught else, bring back the failing appetite[1]. For man is going to his long, his eternal home, and the procession of mourners, the professional mourners of the East, is already moving along the street.' 'Remember,' he says, 'thy Creator, ere the day of death; ere the silver cord be loosened which lets fall and shivers the golden bowl that feeds with oil the lamp of life; ere the pitcher lie shattered by the spring, and the fountain of life can no longer be replenished; ere the broken wheel stand idly by the well-side' (vv. 2–6). We listen to the melancholy cadence of these touching images. We turn from the long-drawn anatomical explanations of men who would replace with a dissector's report a painter's touch, a poet's melody.

'Then,' so he ends, 'all will be over; dust will go back to dust. The elements will be set free, and be mingled with their kind. But the spirit,' he adds, the spirit of which he spoke so doubtingly before[2], 'will mount upward to the God

[1] I need hardly say that the sense of these three clauses is doubtful to the last degree; *and the almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and the caper-berry shall fail*, R. V.

[2] iii. 21. See p. 77.

who gave it.' *Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.* It was a gift from Him, that spirit. To Him it will return. More he says not. Its absorption, the re-entering of the human unit into the eternal and unknown spirit, would be a thought, it would seem, alien to a Hebrew. But we must not press his words too far. As just now he spoke of a judgment, but gave us no picture of the sheep on the right hand, the goats on the left, so here he has no more to say, no clear and dogmatic assertion of a conscious and separate future life. *Into Thy hands I commend my spirit*, said the trustful Psalmist. *Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit*, said He who bowed His head upon the Cross, who tasted death for our sakes. Our Preacher leaves the spirit with its God, that is all—and that is much. 'God will call us to judgment,' he has said; and now he adds, 'The body moulders, the spirit passes back to the God who gave it.'

His tale is told.

Let me add a few words on the few verses that yet remain. They form, it will be seen at once, an Epilogue to the work. The word, the mysterious word, translated 'The Preacher,' comes again into use. The opening words—the text, as it were—of the prologue are repeated. *Vanity of vanities*[1], *saith the Preacher, all is vanity.* The author is no longer speaking to us in the first person, but is spoken of in the third. We note at once the change.

Hence it is widely held that all these verses were added by some other and later writer; and though I incline myself to believe that they belong to the original work, and reassume the form in which its opening words were clothed, yet I shall not venture to say that this is a point absolutely beyond dispute, or to claim the striking verse with which the epilogue ends as incontestably and beyond all doubt the writer's own.

[1] I have, it will be seen, taken the view that these words belong to the Epilogue rather than to the preceding paragraph.

Whoever speaks, speaks of the author, in verse 9, as of a wise man who *taught much, studied much, set in order many wise sayings, proverbs*, or parables, instructive language clothed in metaphor, the favourite mode of Eastern teaching; sacred, need I say, to us, servants of the Great Master of parables. He adds, in verse 10, that he aimed to speak at once *words that would please* and *words which were true;* words which would be at once *goads* to the intellect, and yet *stakes* that would uphold and stay the soul of man, both coming alike from the same great teacher, the one Shepherd[1].

Then there comes a warning: 'Listen to the words of wisdom.' *And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.* 'Beware of mere multitudes of books, of endless study and reading.' *It is a weariness to the flesh.* Whatever the lesson of the words, they point, we see at once, to no early stage in a nation's history; with its laborious inscriptions, carved on stone, or stamped on clay, its rare writings on skins or parchment. The picture of a later age, of some well-stored library, is forced upon us.

And then comes the end of all. The bitter sense of 'the riddle of the painful earth' is gone; the call to lose it in enjoyment is gone; the sense that 'all is vanity' is gone. *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man*, or rather, *the whole of man;* the word 'duty' is not in the original; *For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.*

Fear God, and keep His commandments. The fear of God is with the Psalmist, not the end, but the beginning of

[1] *And further, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written uprightly, even words of truth. The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails* (tent stakes) *fastened are the words of the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd*, R. V.

wisdom. The Apostle speaks of 'a perfect love that casteth out fear.' The dimmer light that shines through the darkness of this book does not cast its beams so high. It is enough if in any way it is 'a lantern to the feet' of him who walks by it; if it illuminates one, or two, or three, of the lower steps of the ascent 'that mounts through darkness up to God.' Some things, at least, he has held to, or won, under its guidance; the sense of a Divine Ruler; of an eternal law of duty towards Him, a law embracing the whole man, body, soul, and spirit; and of a day when every secret thing shall be revealed, all wrongs righted, all evil judged.

When shall that judgment be? Where shall that throne be set? What is the nature, what the relation to us, of that God whom we are to fear? How is He revealed to us? How are we to keep His commandments? What are those commandments?

For an answer to these questions we must turn elsewhere. The pilgrim with whom we have walked, walked through the very valley of the shadow of death, still bears his burden as we part from him; we leave him still climbing the Hill Difficulty; his feet are still bleeding, and if discrowned, he wears a crown of sorrow. But his steps are upward, his face forward, and before him, unseen and dimly guessed, are the Everlasting Hills, and the light of God's presence, and a Divine Revelation yet to come.

May his pain and distress, his wanderings and gloom, his brighter moments or heavenward glances, not have been in vain for us, who have watched them from a vantage ground which it was not his to reach! And, may He who flashed into his darkened soul those nobler truths, sustain, enlighten and uphold those whom the same shadows haunt, the same darkness clouds, and lead them and all of us, step by step, to perfect day!

[January 17, 1885.]

THE END.

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